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SEPTEMBER 2011

The Observation Post

Allen M. Steele



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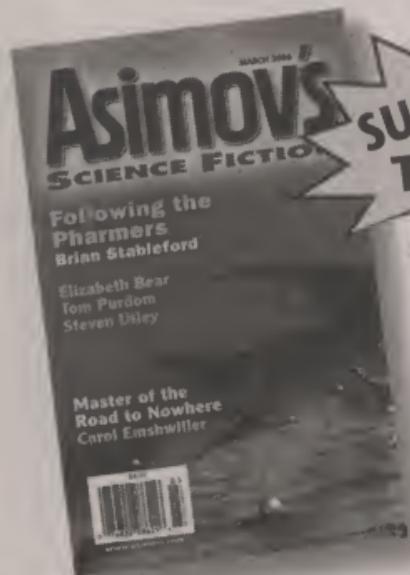
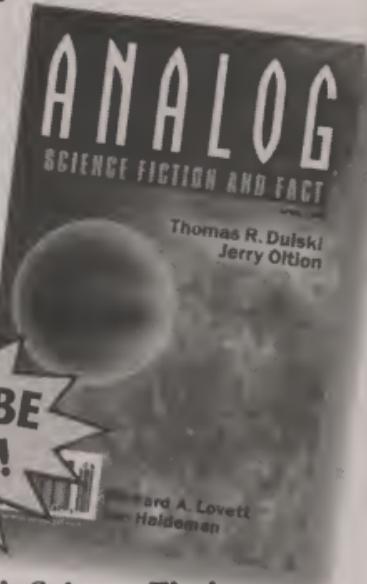
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SCIENCE FICTION

SEPTEMBER 2011

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NOVELETTES

12	THE OBSERVATION POST	ALLEN M. STEELE
44	SHADOW ANGEL	ERICK MELTON
90	BURNING BIBLES	ALAN WALL

SHORT STORIES

28	D.O.C.S.	NEAL BARRETT, JR.
34	DANILO	CAROL EMSHWILLER
58	THE ODOR OF SANCTITY	IAN CREASEY
70	GRANDMA SAID	R. NEUBE
82	STALKER	ROBERT REED

POETRY

27	HAROLD GETS OFF ON THE DOPPLER EFFECT	JAMES KAMLET
33	I HAVE A REMOTE IN EACH HAND	JESSY RANDALL
43	ELVEN ALVIN	P M F JOHNSON
69	STONE ROACH	FIONA MOORE
81	THE MUSIC OF ROBOTS	BRUCE BOSTON
105	SCIENCE FICTION HAIKU	KENDALL EVANS & DAVID C. KOPASKA-MERKEL

DEPARTMENTS

4	EDITORIAL: TWENTY-FIFTH ANNUAL READERS' AWARDS' RESULTS	SHEILA WILLIAMS
7	REFLECTIONS: THE REIGN OF THE RETIRED EMPEROR	ROBERT SILVERBERG
106	NEXT ISSUE	
107	ON BOOKS	PAUL DI FILIPPO
112	THE SF CONVENTIONAL CALENDAR	ERWIN S. STRAUSS

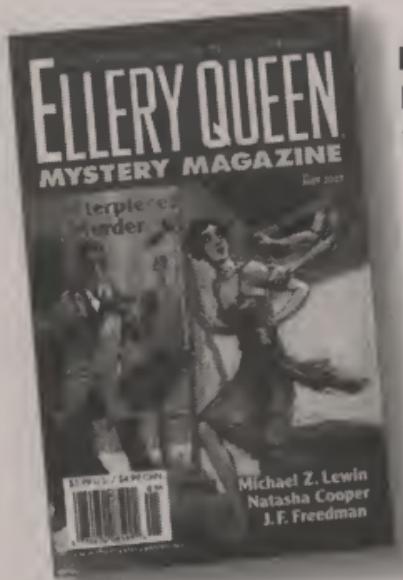
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TWENTY-FIFTH ANNUAL READERS' AWARDS' RESULTS

The Twenty-Fifth Annual Readers' Awards ballots were overflowing with comments from readers. As always, I had a great deal of fun going through them—I love the diverse feedback that I get from all of you.

Naturally, there was a wide range of favorites and a wide range of thoughts about those favorites. Alan K. Lipton certainly made my day when he wrote: "Different writers have different strengths. SF is the literature of ideas, and while some of your authors have strong ideas, as a reader and writer, I respond better to the power of storytelling style (Allen M. Steele and Robert Reed come to mind) and occasionally graceful language (Kate Wilhelm). I'm not a big fan of bleak, but there's no arguing with certain masterworks (Barry B. Longyear's "Alten Kamaraden"). Choosing my favorites once a year is hard enough. You have to do this every day. Sometimes I'd want your job, other times not. But you do it so well." Nathaniel Williams wrote to tell us, "Preston's 'Helping Them Take the Old Man Down' was this year's standout story for me. I loved its deft blend of nostalgia and contemporary politics, its ability to find metaphors for the complexities of post-9/11 American life within SF's pulp traditions. Stories like that keep me coming back to *Asimov's*." And Stephen Antoniewicz simply said, "More Tanith Lee please."

Jeff L. Powell complained, "Please, I beg you, stop printing so many good stories. I pull out half my remaining hair every year at ballot time. Thank you. Now the object of public scorn." His son, Jeffrey David Powell said, "Looking over my list of winners makes me realize how vibrant SF still is, if you consider how the majority of these writers have not been around for a long time. (That's not to say

I don't miss some of the more established writers like Connie Willis and Charles Stross that haven't had a story in *Asimov's* in so long.)" To this last comment, let me add, that I miss them, too. Unfortunately for us, the more experienced authors often move on to writing novels almost exclusively, but Connie assures me she has nearly finished a new tale for us. Let's keep our fingers crossed that she delivers it soon! Connie was a guest at our Readers' Award celebration this year (along with her husband Courtney and daughter Cordelia), which was held over the Nebula Awards Weekend on May 21, 2011, in Washington, D.C.

On his ballot, long-time reader Soon Lee remarked, "One might think that the novella category with fewest candidates would be the easiest to pick, but it didn't turn out that way. Other categories were similarly strong. I have a soft spot for humorous stories so the Tim McDaniel story with the really long title and Kit Reed's 'Monkey Do' were highlights. I also especially enjoyed William Preston's novelette, 'Helping Them Take the Old Man Down.'" Speaking of the novella category, the younger Powell also said, "The developments in the latest novella by Kristine Kathryn Rusch really, really, really makes me want the next story to come out soon. Please make it so!" Kris Rusch's "Becoming One With the Ghosts" won the novella award in a tight struggle for first place. Unfortunately, she couldn't make it out to the East Coast, but with another Diving novella in our wings, perhaps we'll get to see her next year.

With his moving tale of "The Emperor of Mars," Allen M. Steele emerged as the frontrunner in the novelette category. Allen gave an amusing speech at our awards breakfast. Before the ceremony, he had combed through the Locus Index



L. to R.: Michael Swanwick, Michael Whelan, Allen M. Steele, and Sheila Williams

to Science Fiction Awards <www.locusmag.com/SFAwards/index.html>, and joyfully determined that with this win he would tie Mike Resnick and Kris Rusch for the most Asimov's Readers' Awards for fiction. Alas, with the news that Kris had picked up another award, he wryly remarked that he had instantly slipped back into second place.

The fiercest fiction fight for first place occurred at our shortest length. This led to the first-ever tie in short story. Carol Emshwiller couldn't be there to accept her award for the unsettling "Lovely Ugly," but I hope to present it to her at lunch in New York later this spring. Happily, Michael Swanwick was on hand to collect his certificate for "Libertarian Russia." Later that night, Michael served as the Nebulas Awards' toastmaster. Michael's wonderful wife, Marianne Porter, who was also at our breakfast, took lots of photos of the winners. One of her shots illustrates this editorial.

Kyle Rathbun spoke for many readers when he wrote, "I have to choose 'Welcome Home—the Nebula Song' by Janis Ian first. A lot of musicians write good lyrics and [this poem is] quite topical (I actually get quite a 'welcome home' feeling when reading your magazine)." Ten years ago, Janis attended a Readers'

Award celebration as a guest of Mike Resnick. Scheduling conflicts didn't allow her to make the ceremony this year as the winner of the poetry category, but Janis sent along the following message to our readers: "I have lived on science fiction for as long as I can remember. As a musician, I regard this form as the jazz of prose. To be honored in this manner by *Asimov's* readers is a highlight in my life, right up there with my Grammys and Hall of Fame awards. Thank you!"

Our twenty-fifth annual award turned out to be the first one to have two first-place ties. The battle raged in best cover as well as short story. Although one of the ultimate winners, Tomislav Tikulin, couldn't make the trip from Zagreb to D.C., Michael Whelan was in town to collect a Solstice Award from the Science Fiction and Fantasy Writers of America in recognition of the significant impact and positive influence he's had on the speculative fiction field. As the winner of three of our awards for best cover and the creator of many of our other cover images, Michael has certainly had a strong and positive influence on *Asimov's* as well.

We look forward to hearing your thoughts about the 2011 stories when we post the ballot for our next set of Readers' Awards. O

READERS' AWARD WINNERS

BEST NOVELLA

1. BECOMING ONE WITH THE GHOSTS;
KRISTINE KATHRYN RUSCH
2. Jackie's Boy; Steven Popkes
3. The Sultan of the Clouds; Geoffrey A. Landis
4. Several Items of Interest; Rick Wilber
5. The Ice Line; Stephen Baxter

BEST NOVELETTE

1. THE EMPEROR OF MARS;
ALLEN M. STEELE
2. Torhec the Sculptor; Tanith Lee
3. Marya and the Pirate; Geoffrey A. Landis
4. Helping Them Take the Old Man Down; William Preston
5. Plus or Minus; James Patrick Kelly

BEST SHORT STORY

1. THE LOVELY UGLY;
CAROL EMSHWILLER (tie)
1. LIBERTARIAN RUSSIA;
MICHAEL SWANWICK (tie)
3. The Incarceration of Captain Nebula; Mike Resnick
4. Conditional Love; Felicity Shoulders
5. Names for Water; Kij Johnson (tie)
5. The Other Graces; Alice Sola Kim (tie)

BEST POEM

1. WELCOME HOME;
JANIS IAN
2. Our Canine Defense Team; Vincent Miskell
3. Foxwife; Jane Yolen
4. Roadside Stand; Mark Rich
5. The Now We Almost Inhabit; Roger Dutcher & Robert Frazier

BEST COVER

1. JULY;
TOMISLAV TIKULIN (tie)
1. AUGUST;
MICHAEL WHELAN (tie)
3. March; Donato Giancola
4. September; Jeroen Advocaat
5. January; Jeroen Advocaat

THE REIGN OF THE RETIRED EMPEROR

A few years ago I went to Japan to attend the World Science Fiction Convention in Yokohama, and, on the same trip, visiting a museum in Kyoto, I came upon a collection of artifacts that were described as dating "from the time of the reign of the retired Emperor Go-Saga."

Dating an era from the time of a *retired* emperor seemed to me an odd thing to do, and I filed the notion away in my mind as one of the many unusual aspects of the culture of that far-off island nation. Last month I was reminded of it while writing a new short story—more about that below—and I consulted Sir George Sansom's classic and estimable three-volume history of Japan to see if I could find out what was so important about the Emperor Go-Saga that caused such chronological emphasis to be placed on him, thus discovering one of the most curious monarchical systems human beings have ever devised. It was a system, I learned, in which the emperor became more important by retiring from the throne than he had ever been while possessing it.

This had its origin, Sir George tells us, in a long-standing tradition among medieval Japanese nobility, the retirement of the head of a great house at an early age so that he could spend his later years free from the heavy demands of ritual and ceremony. The emperor, of course, was the highest figure of all. Since earliest times the title of emperor had always gone to the eldest son of a single family that claimed to be able to trace its ancestry back to the primordial gods. In theory the emperor held the powers of government in his own hands.

By the year 1000 or so, though, even the Japanese emperor found himself so burdened by his ceremonial duties that he had little time for anything else—and,

in fact, the main executive responsibilities of the throne had been taken over by a powerful aristocratic family, the Fujiwara. For two centuries from 858 onward the Fujiwara regents exercised the real imperial power in the name of the emperor, though they did not hold the imperial title itself. Thus the emperor was a mere figurehead while the house of Fujiwara ran the country.

When the Emperor Go-Sanjo came to the throne in 1068, he was determined to break the power of the Fujiwara, and bit by bit he reclaimed imperial authority from them. But his administrative tasks were complicated by the immense weight of ceremonial functions that an emperor was called upon to perform, and in the third year of his reign he hit upon an ingenious solution. He would abdicate in favor of his son Shirikawa and retire to a monastic cloister, ostensibly to devote his life to religious contemplation. But in fact he would continue to govern from the cloister, while the boy-emperor Shirikawa performed all the ceremonial duties of a monarch.

The Japanese word for such a cloister is "In," and Go-Sanjo's name now became Go-Sanjo In, "the cloistered Emperor Go-Sanjo." (The prefix "Go" means that he was the second monarch of that name.) He died, however, only a year after his retirement, leaving young Shirikawa as emperor in fact as well as name.

The new emperor quickly came to see that the system of imperial retirement was the best way to hold the Fujiwara regents at bay. He ruled as sovereign until 1086, and then, at the age of thirty-three, took holy orders and entered a cloister, leaving his seven-year-old son Horikawa to hold the empty title of emperor. For the next forty-three years the cloistered Shirikawa, now called Shirikawa In,

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ruled the country from his monastic seclusion while three different figurehead emperors came and went.

This strange arrangement developed serious complications when some of the figureheads began to crave royal power themselves. Toba, who had become emperor in 1107 at the age of four after the death of his father Horikawa, abdicated to the cloister when he was twenty, putting his own four-year-old son Sutoko on the throne. But now there were two cloistered emperors, Shirakawa In and Toba In. Conflicts developed between the retired imperial father and his retired imperial son over the next two years, until old Shirakawa's death in 1129.

The problem arose once more when Sutoko chose to retire in 1141, so that two retired emperors again vied for power. Both Toba In and Sutoko In outlived the next titular emperor, Konoye, whose place was taken in 1155 by Konoye's twenty-eight-year-old son, Go-Shirakawa, a shrewd and agile figure who made a fine art out of the cloistering system.

Within three years the retired emperors Toba and Sutoko both were dead, and Go-Shirakawa quickly took himself off to the cloister himself, where between 1158 and 1192 he maintained his imperial standing through the reigns of no less than five younger emperors. During this period, also, he deftly handled challenges from various warlord families seeking to attain the sort of power the Fujiwara family had had, playing one faction off against another to keep them at bay.

By the time of Go-Shirakawa's death in 1192 new clans—the Minamoto and the Taira—were contending for the old Fujiwara powers, and the incumbent emperor, Go-Toba, who had succeeded to the imperial title in 1184 at the age of four, was still too young to abdicate and try to rule from the cloister as Go-Shirakawa had done. Skillfully and courageously he contrived to govern without the support of a senior emperor until 1198, when, still only eighteen, he did finally withdraw to cloistered life. But the system of imperial retirement was breaking down under

Robert Silverberg

pressure from the Minamoto family, and when Go-Toba In launched civil war against the current head of the Minamoto clan he was defeated and banished. He was replaced by his more cooperative brother, and the emperors once again became subordinate to one of the great warrior families, who now even took upon themselves the right to determine the succession to the throne.

This was not the last of the system of abdication, though. Control of the government had now fallen to the Hojo family, but there still were advantages to being a cloistered emperor. The actual emperor had neither power nor wealth: he was, as Sansom puts it, "a mere prisoner of ceremonial." It was the *retired* emperor who retained control of the imperial estates, which provided him with a vast income that caused the great nobles and high officials to cluster about him, eager to perform services for him. And so each new emperor, upon inheriting the imperial property at the death of the previous retired emperor, would retire as quickly as possible himself, handing the wearisome ceremonial duties off to his hapless successor and withdrawing from the court to enjoy the benefits of his riches.

This practice created difficulties when the Emperor Go-Saga retired after a reign of only four years, 1242-1246, leaving the throne to his young son Go-Fukusaka. But Go-Saga actually preferred his second son, Kameyama, and in 1259 the retired emperor forced Go-Fukusaka to abdicate in Kameyama's favor. Go-Fukusaka thus became the junior retired emperor, without power or wealth, and his younger brother Kameyama, as titular emperor, now stood to inherit the imperial estates upon Go-Saga's death, which occurred in 1272.

Alas, Kameyama found the imperial duties very little to his liking, and in 1274, at the age of twenty-six, he abdicated in favor of his son Go-Uda. This angered his older brother Go-Fukusaka, who had expected to place his own son on the throne once Kameyama was out of

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SALUTES THE WINNERS OF THE 2010 NEBULA AWARDS

BEST NOVEL

BLACKOUT/ALL CLEAR

Connie Willis

BEST NOVELLA

**"THE LADY WHO PLUCKED
RED FLOWERS BENEATH THE
QUEEN'S WINDOW"**

Rachel Swirsky

BEST NOVELETTE

**"That Leviathan, Whom Thou
Hast Made"**

(*Analogs*, September 2010)

Eric James Stone

BEST SHORT STORY (TIE)

"Ponies"

Kij Johnson

"How Interesting: A Tiny Man"

Harlan Ellison

the way. War threatened between the two branches of the imperial family. The Hojo regents managed to work out a bizarre compromise in which the succession to the throne would alternate between the two sets of claimants, and in the next thirty years five boy-emperors took their turns, each one quickly abdicating, until at last, in 1313, the throne came to Go-Uda's son Go-Daigo, who was, unlike his recent predecessors, not a child at all—he was past thirty and wanted not only the imperial title but also the governing power that once had gone with it. This, of course, wrecked the whole system: civil war broke out, Go-Daigo was forced to flee from the capital, the regents named their own emperor, and for the next fifty years Japan had two royal courts and two emperors until the war of succession was eventually resolved by the advent of new warlords who forced a unification of the imperial courts in 1392.

A strange system indeed, this business of the holding of power by retired emperors, but it did have a curious logic of its own.

And I seem to have invented a somewhat similar system myself for use in the books and stories I've written over the past thirty years that are set on the giant planet of Majipoor—beginning with the novel *Lord Valentine's Castle*, which was published in 1980, and continuing most recently with the short story "The End of the Line" written last month for *Asimov's Science Fiction*. *

I postulated a dual monarchy for Majipoor: a senior monarch whom I called the Pontifex (the Latin word for "bridge-builder") who formulated policy, and a junior one, the Coronal Lord, or, simply, the Coronal (because his symbol of office was the coronet that he wore), whose responsibility it was to execute that policy. Each Pontifex chose his own Coronal. When a Pontifex died, the Coronal would succeed to his title and choose a Coronal of his own.

The resemblance to the Japanese

system, about which I knew nothing at all when I wrote the first Majipoor book, emerges from the fact that the Pontifex lives in retirement, dwelling in a huge subterranean city known as the Labyrinth. He is rarely if ever seen in the world above; it is the Coronal, the younger monarch, who is the public face of the regime, constantly traveling to and fro across gigantic Majipoor to take part in endless formal ceremonies. From time to time he visits the Labyrinth to consult the older man on matters of policy; and whenever war breaks out, it is the Coronal who commands the troops, though the Pontifex dictates tactics from his hidden underground lair.

One consequence of the Majipoor system was that the Coronal often did not want to give up his active life and disappear into the gloomy retirement of the Labyrinth, and I told of at least one instance in which an aged and senile Pontifex is kept on life support for decades so that his Coronal can avoid succession to the senior title. (Eventually he is unable to stave off the inevitable, though, because the world needs two functional monarchs.) On another occasion, a Pontifex who has come to hate life in the Labyrinth feigns insanity, abdicates, and touches off a weird constitutional crisis. That story, "Calintane Explains," was published in *Asimov's* in 1982.

I wish I had known something about Japanese imperial history when I was writing the Majipoor stories. I might have tried a story about two rival lines of succession such as came into being as a result of Go-Daigo's rebellion against the system. (I did do a novel about a civil war between rival Coronals—*Sorcerers of Majipoor*—but it simply involved the standard sort of usurpation of the throne.) But it's too late for that now. Now that I've written this column, everyone will know where I got the idea, and I can't have that. I want you all to believe that I just make those stories up, after all. ○

* And published in our August 2011 issue.—Ed.

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THE OBSERVATION POST

Allen M. Steele

Allen M. Steele's most recent story for us, "The Emperor of Mars," picked up the 2010 Readers' Award for Best Novelette. He tells us that his latest tale "was inspired by *One Minute to Midnight* by Michael Dobbs, a recent history of the Cuban Missile Crisis." The author's new novella, "Angel of Europa," has just come out in hardcover from Subterranean Press.

Now I'm old, but when I was young I did something that has weighed upon my conscience ever since. In all the years that followed, I've never told anyone about this. Not my late wife or my children or grandchildren, or any of my friends, or even the priests to whom I've dutifully confessed all other sins. My actions may have saved the world, but they took the form of betrayal . . . and worse.

A few months ago, I was diagnosed with an inoperable and terminal form of cancer. My doctor has informed me that, in all likelihood, I'll be dead by the end of the year. Even so, I probably would have taken my secret to the grave, secure in the knowledge that no one would ever learn what I did nearly fifty years ago. That's fine with me. I'm not a hero.

Just the other day, though, I saw someone on the street whom I haven't seen since 1962. Just the mere fact that I spotted this individual has made me change my mind. Perhaps people should know what happened, if only to remind them how dangerous our times have become, and that our deeds will be remembered by later generations.

My name is Floyd Moore. I was twenty-three years old in 1962, an ensign in the U.S. Navy and a radioman aboard the *Centurion*. The *Centurion* wasn't a vessel; it was a blimp, one of five N-class airships built during the '50s as submarine hunters and later modified to serve as an advance early warning system in the days before the undersea SOSUS network was established.

The Goodyear blimps you see at football games had about as much in common with the *Centurion* as a Chevy pick-up does with a Corvette: same manufacturer, but the similarity ends there. The *Centurion* was 343 feet long and 108 feet high, and was powered by two 800-horsepower engines. It had a double-decker car with crew space for twenty-one; the bunks, bathroom, galley, and ward room were squeezed into the upper deck above the cockpit, AEW compartment, and engine room. It could stay aloft for over two hundred hours without having to land; its

cruising speed was 56 mph, although in a pinch it could reach a maximum airspeed of 80 mph.

When I went through communications training at the Navy flight school in Pensacola, I'd thought I was going to wind up aboard an aircraft carrier, so I was disappointed when I was put on a blimp instead. However, I soon discovered that I liked this job much better. The *Centurion* was based in Key West, so my newly wed wife and I were able to rent a little beach cottage off-base, and my patrols never took me away from home for more than a few days. Our captain, Roy Gerrard, had been flying blimps since World War II, and the crew was a tight-knit bunch; you could've easily taken us for a group of men who belonged to some club that happened to have its own blimp.

The pleasure we took from our job, though, was tempered by the knowledge that the *Centurion's* days were numbered. Blimps were obsolete. Planes had already taken over the task of hunting subs, and once the SOSUS net was in place, advance early warning would be taken from us, too. Now that America and Russia were shooting guys into space, there was even talk that there would soon be military space stations. Alan Shepard was a Navy man and we were proud of him for being the first American in space, but we were all too aware that his Mercury capsule made a blimp look pretty old-fashioned. Whenever the *Centurion* went out on patrol, we knew that it might be for the last time.

But our mission in the first week of October '62 was rather unusual. Instead of flying up the Atlantic coast to New England and back again, Captain Gerrard had received orders to go the other way, down to the Bahamas northeast of Cuba, where we would conduct aerial reconnaissance of the passages between the Acklins, Mayaguana, and Caicos islands. We were supposed to be searching for Russian subs, of course—Nikita had lately become a little too chummy with Fidel for anyone's comfort—but we were also to be on the lookout for any freighters or fishing trawlers that appeared to be heading for Cuba.

And we'd taken aboard a new crewmember: Lt. Robert Arnault, a Naval Intelligence officer temporarily replacing the j.g. who usually had the same job. None of us had ever met him before; he'd flown in from Washington only a couple of days earlier, and although he tried to be one of the guys, it soon became apparent that he wasn't going to fit in. Captain Gerrard was still in command, but it was Lt. Arnault who was calling the shots. The skipper's sealed orders had been hand-delivered by the lieutenant and they were the only people aboard who'd read them; the rest of us were in the dark as to what this was all about. Arnault wasn't overbearing—he slept in the same bunkroom and ate the same meals with us, and he could make small talk about the World Series or that new spy movie starring some fellow named Connery—but he wouldn't say a word about why we were here.

You, of course, have the benefit of hindsight. It was at this time that the Soviet Union began a secret operation to arm Cuba with nuclear weapons. They did this because the U.S. had recently placed long-range nuclear missiles in Turkey, and also to prevent another invasion like the one at the Bay of Pigs the year before. So Russian vessels were bringing in medium-range R-12s and intermediate-range R-14s, any one of which could easily reach the American mainland, along with short-range battlefield rockets equipped with low-yield tactical nukes that could be used to repel an invasion.

But the Americans had a mole in the Kremlin, a Soviet military intelligence officer who'd been feeding Russian secrets to the CIA. Colonel Penkovsky was eventually caught and executed, but not before he tipped off the Americans as to what Khrushchev was planning. The CIA didn't have any solid evidence that the U.S.S.R. was sending nukes to Cuba, though, and they would need firm proof before they could take the matter to President Kennedy. So that's why the *Centurion* was watching for Russian vessels sailing to Cuba.

For four days, we orbited Acklins, Mayaguana, and Caicos, maintaining constant surveillance of the passages between them from an altitude of 2,500 feet. We spotted plenty of ships, but only a couple were flying the red Soviet flag. When that happened, we'd descend to 1,500 feet and shadow them for awhile, monitoring their wireless communications and taking pictures that we'd transmit back to Key West via radio facsimile. Nothing about their appearance suggested that they were carrying missiles, though, and their radios would go silent when we were in the vicinity.

We weren't aware that most of the rockets were still on the way. The ships carrying them were still in the North Atlantic and wouldn't arrive in the Caribbean for another week or so. However, the first few R-12s had already reached Cuba, along with a handful of tactical missiles. The R-12s didn't have the range to hit Washington or New York, but they could blow away Miami or New Orleans. Not only that, but Khrushchev had given Castro permission to launch the missiles if the U.S. attacked his country, and Fidel had no problems with nuking the *yanquis*; along with some Kremlin hard-liners, he believed that a first strike would settle matters once and for all. They weren't aware of it, but Air Force General Curtis LeMay and many other American counterparts shared the same sentiments.

The world was on the brink of nuclear war, and no one knew it yet. Almost no one, that is.

On the morning of Friday, October 5th, I came down from the bunkroom to take my watch at the radio board in the AWS compartment. As I relieved the radioman who'd handled the overnight shift, I noticed that the dawn sky was an ominous shade of red. For the past two days, we'd been receiving weather reports from Puerto Rico about a tropical storm off the Leeward Islands southeast of our position. As soon as I saw those amber-streaked clouds, I had a hunch it was getting closer.

I was right. No sooner had I sat down than the telex rang three times, signaling an incoming message. I waited while the message printed out, then I ripped it off, opened my codebook, and spent the next minute or so deciphering it. Captain Gerard had just come downstairs when I handed the decoded message to him.

The captain read it and sighed. "Great," he muttered. "That makes my day." The other officers in the AWS compartment turned to look at him as he went on. "That tropical storm south of us has become a Cat 1 cyclone. It's now called Hurricane Daisy, and its present track has it becoming Cat 2 and turning north-northwest."

"That's coming our way, isn't it, skipper?" That came from our flight engineer Jimmy Costa—"Handsome Jimmy" we called him, because he wasn't—who'd just stuck his head in from the engine room.

"Uh-huh." The captain folded the message and gave it back to me so I could file it. "We're to land at the nearest available field and sit it out." A terse smile. "Glad someone has the common sense to order us in."

Everyone nodded. Back in the thirties, the Navy had lost two dirigibles, the *Akron* and the *Macon*, during storms at sea. No one in the airship corps had forgotten that disaster, but we were always scared that we'd get some dummy in charge of things who thought that a blimp could fly through a hurricane. Lucky for us, a dummy hadn't written our orders.

But we still had a problem: where to land? A blimp doesn't need a runway—it can touch down almost anywhere—but it does require a mooring tower if it's going to be tied down for awhile, which is what we'd need to do if the *Centurion* was going to ride out a hurricane. Key West was too far away; we'd never make it before the storm overtook us. Puerto Rico was closer, but it lay in the direction Daisy was coming from. And the U.S. naval base at Guantanamo Bay was out of the question; Lt. Ar-

nault reminded the captain that our mission orders specifically stated that we were not to approach Cuba under any circumstances.

Our navigator, Harry Taggart, pulled out a loose-leaf notebook and flipped to the list of possible airship landing sites in the Caribbean, and sure enough, he found one: Great Inagua, the larger of a pair of small islands about fifty miles west of Caicos and fifty-five miles east of Cuba. Only one town, but it had an airfield, and on that airfield was a mooring tower that had been there since WW II. The *Centurion* was on the other side of Caicos; we could easily reach Great Inagua before Daisy came through.

So I sent a telex to Key West informing them of our plans, and as soon as it was confirmed, Phil Bennet turned his pilot's wheel and put us on west-by-southwest bearing for Great Inagua. I called ahead to Matthew Town and after a half-hour or so I finally heard a Caribbean-accented voice through my headphones. He told me his name was Samuel Parker, and although he was surprised that an American airship was on its way, he assured me that he'd muster a ground crew for us.

The *Centurion* reached the Inagua islands shortly before noon. We passed over Little Inagua, a tiny spit of sand and grass that appeared to have sea birds and wild goats as its sole inhabitants, and came upon Great Inagua, which wasn't much larger but at least showed signs of human presence. Matthew Town was located on the island's southwest corner; as the blimp's shadow passed over its sun-bleached rooftops, townspeople came out to stare up at us. Not much seemed to be down there: a bunch of houses, a church steeple, a handful of fishing boats tied up at the dock.

The airstrip was primitive, a single runway that looked as if it had been last resurfaced around the time Amelia Earhart disappeared. The mooring tower was located at its coastal end, not far from a couple of small hangars on the verge of collapse. It looked like a misplaced Aztec pyramid, its iron frame rusted black and flecked with salt. Six dark men in shorts and island shirts lounged beside the antique flatbed truck that had brought them there, smoking cigarettes as they watched the blimp come down; it wasn't until *Centurion* was only twenty feet above the asphalt that one of them tossed away his smoke and sauntered out to raise his hands above his head while his companions trotted over to grab hold of our lines.

The islanders dragged the ship the rest of the way in while one of them climbed a ladder up the tower and snapped a cable hook to the blimp's prow. A diesel wrench then reeled in the cable until the *Centurion* was snugly docked against the tower. Eight of our guys jumped out of the car and helped the local ground crew pull the lines as far as they would go, then used a sledge hammer to pound iron pitons into the sandy ground and lashed the ropes to them. The skipper waited until he was sure the *Centurion* wasn't going anywhere before he ordered Phil to cut the engines.

I joined Captain Gerrard and Lt. Arnault as the locals ambled over to greet us, and it wasn't hard to tell that they were amused to have a Navy blimp make an emergency landing in their forgotten little part of the world. In fact, we'd later learn that the only reason why the tower hadn't been torn down for scrap metal was that every year the U.S. State Department sent the District of Inagua a five hundred dollar rent check. Among the group was Samuel Parker, the person with whom I'd spoken on the radio; besides running the airfield, he also was the customs officer. He made a great show of asking for our passports, which he carefully inspected as if we might be anyone except what our uniforms plainly showed us to be, before he formally shook hands with Captain Gerrard and welcomed us to Great Inagua.

The wind was beginning to pick up by then. The sky was still bright blue, but a dark wall of clouds had become visible on the southern horizon. We were prepared to spend the night in the blimp, but Mr. Parker wouldn't hear of it. There was a large guesthouse in Matthew Town that we were welcome to use, and a restaurant across the street was already prepared to have us over for dinner.

Captain Gerrard quickly took him up on the offer; after four days of sleeping in narrow bunks and having canned food for breakfast, lunch, and dinner, some Caribbean hospitality would be a nice change of pace. We couldn't leave the *Centurion* by itself, though, so the captain asked for two volunteers to stay with the blimp. Harry and Phil raised their hands; they'd keep watch on the blimp, and use a walkie-talkie to call for help if the storm threatened to break it loose from its moorings. The rest of us fetched our duffel bags, then crowded into the back of the beat-up truck along with the ground crew and held on for dear life as it made a bumpy, gear-grinding journey into Matthew Town.

The town looked pretty much like any other small Caribbean port: whitewashed wood-frame houses on sand-filled streets, an abandoned prison dating back to the 1700s, a church and a few shops surrounding the town square. The kind of place inhabited mainly by native Caribbeans and a handful of retired British civil servants; there were probably more sea gulls than people. Not exactly a tourist destination. I figured that we were probably the only visitors the town had seen in a while.

I was wrong.

As it turned out, Daisy only sideswiped the Bahamas. By the end of the day the hurricane turned north and headed for the East Coast; the following day it would dump several inches of rain on New England before petering out over Nova Scotia. As cyclones go, Daisy was something of a wallflower.

There was no sense in taking the blimp aloft again. The crew spent the afternoon in the guest house, playing cards and listening to the Series on the radio as wind-driven rain lashed against the windows. The storm subsided just before sundown, but the winds were still just high enough to make flying hazardous, so Captain Gerrard decided that we might as well spend the night on Great Inagua and take off again the next morning. Call it shore leave.

None of us were unhappy with the decision save for Lt. Arnault, who seemed nervous about the prospect of missing any Russian freighters bound for Cuba. But the *Centurion* was the skipper's blimp, and he wasn't about to do anything that would unnecessarily put his ship and crew in harm's way. Besides, he reminded Arnault, any Soviet vessels in the vicinity had probably dropped anchor somewhere to ride out the hurricane; they weren't going anywhere either.

The guest house was a two-story inn in the middle of Matthew Town, the doors to its rooms facing outside. The *Centurion* had arrived after what passed for tourist season on Great Inagua, so we were able to take over the whole place. Most of the crew shared quarters, but Captain Gerrard claimed a room for his own. So did Lt. Arnault, which nettled a lot of the guys; *who does he think he is?* was the general consensus. I didn't care one way or another; I was bunking with Handsome Jimmy, notorious among the crew for his snoring, and so I knew I probably wouldn't get a lot of sleep that night.

The island's only restaurant was just across the street, and as Mr. Parker had told us, the proprietors had been forewarned that twenty-one Navy men would be coming over for dinner. By the time we'd wandered in, they'd laid out a nice spread: grilled tarpon fresh from the dock, with hush puppies, greens, and the best key lime pie I've ever had. There was a bar in the next room, complete with a pool table and a TV; after we finished stuffing ourselves, we moved over there and settled in for an evening of goofing off.

The regulars gradually filtered into the place, and at first they were put off by the presence of so many uniforms, perhaps afraid that we might be stereotypical American sailors and wreck the joint. But the captain had firmly told us to be on our best behavior, and after a while the locals warmed up to us. A couple of our guys got a pool

tournament going with them, while others gathered at the TV to watch *The Jackie Gleason Show* on a Miami station.

I had just returned to the bar for another beer when I found a young woman sitting there. She was about my age, maybe a year or two older. Women had just started wearing their hair long again, and hers was blond and fell down around the shoulders of her cotton summer dress. She wasn't a raving beauty, but she was pretty all the same, and she was there by herself.

I had no intention of trying to pick her up. My marriage was solid; I was faithful to my wife, and one-night stands had never been my style anyway. It was just that I was tired of seeing no one but other guys, and a pretty girl would be good company for a change. So I walked over, introduced myself, and asked if I could join her. She was a little wary of me, but she nodded anyway, so I parked myself on the next barstool and asked her about herself.

She told me that her name was Helga—no last name, just Helga—and she was from West Germany; I picked up the European accent as soon as she spoke, so the latter was no surprise. She said that she was visiting Great Inagua with two male companions—her cousin Kurt and their friend Alex, an American—and that the three of them were avid birdwatchers who'd come to the islands for its tropical birds. They were renting a house just south of town; she'd dropped in for a drink while Kurt and Alex visited a grocery store down the street.

I told her who I was and why I was there, and she gave me a knowing smile; yes, she'd seen the blimp when it had flown over the island. She was curious about why a Navy blimp would be in the area; our mission was classified, so I told her that it was a routine patrol, nothing more. Even as I said this, though, I became aware of a presence behind me. Glancing over my shoulder, I saw that Arnault had deposited himself on the next barstool.

"Sorry," he said. "Didn't mean to interrupt." He looked at me. "Mind if I butt in, Floyd?"

"Sure. We're just talking." I gestured to the woman sitting next to me. "This is Helga. Helga, this is—"

"Bob Arnault." He raised a finger to the bartender, signaling him for another beer. This was the first time I'd heard him refer to himself as Bob; on the blimp, he was always Lt. Arnault. "You from around here?"

"No." Helga shook her head. "I was just telling Floyd that my friends and I are visiting Inagua to study its birds. There are the loveliest pink flamingos here, and we're photographing them."

"They're staying on the outskirts of town," I added, not wanting to be left out of the conversation. "She says they're—"

"Where are you from?" Arnault asked, ignoring me. "You're not from the States, I can tell."

Helga laughed. "I'm not, but my friend Alex is. My cousin and I are from West Germany."

"Really?" Arnault took a sip from the Red Stripe the bartender had just put in front of him. "Which town?"

"Hannover."

"Hannover! Great place! I was there once, just a couple of years ago. I stayed at a hotel in the center of town, the . . ." Arnault closed his eyes and tapped a finger against the bar, as if trying to conjure a memory. ". . . I can't remember the name."

"Yes. Of course." Helga turned to me again. "As I was saying, there are quite a number of West Indian Flamingos here. Also parrots, herons, pintails . . ."

"Y'know. The major hotel in the middle of the city."

"There are many hotels in Hannover." Helga's smile flickered a bit as she gazed past me at him.

"This one was the biggest." He stared at her. "You know which one I'm talking about ... don't you?"

Helga's face lost its color, and she pointedly looked away from him. I looked over at Arnault, wondering why he was being so rude. "Lieutenant, we were talking about birds. You can't..."

"Can't what, *ensign*?" His eyes narrowed as he deliberately emphasized my lesser rank. "Talk about hotels instead of birds?" A humorless smile. "I can ... but I think it's more interesting that your friend can't give me the name of..."

"Pardon me ... is there a problem?"

I turned to see the tall, blond-haired man who'd come up from behind us. His accent was the same as Helga's, and it wasn't hard to guess that this was Kurt. I don't know how long he'd been standing there, but I guessed that he's overheard some of what Arnault had said.

The lieutenant's face turned red. "Not at all," he replied, a little less sure of himself now. "We were just talking about Germany ... that's where you're from, right?"

"Yes, it is." Kurt looked at Helga. "We've bought dinner for this evening, and Alex is waiting in the car. Are you ready to ...?"

"Yes. Of course." Helga stood up from the bar stool, leaving her drink unfinished. She glanced at me and smiled. "Pleased to meet you, Floyd. I hope you enjoy your visit here."

"Thanks," I said. "And ... um, happy bird-watching." Helga nodded in return, then she stepped past me to join her cousin. Both ignored Arnault as they headed for the door.

But the lieutenant wasn't done with them yet. He waited until the door closed behind them, then jumped off his stool and hurried to the front window. Hiding behind a curtain, he peered outside for a minute or so, then turned to walk back to the bar.

"Lieutenant, what in the world are you ...?" I began.

"Listen, Floyd ... you didn't really buy that story of hers, did you?" Arnault didn't sit down again, but instead leaned against the counter. "That they're here just to watch flamingos?"

"Sure. Why not?"

"Oh, *really*." He gave me a disgusted look, then moved closer, lowering his voice to a near-whisper. "Soviet ships in the vicinity of Cuba, and two Germans just happen to be visiting an island near two of the major passages from the Atlantic to the Cuban coast. Kind of a coincidence, isn't it?"

"Maybe it is." I shrugged and picked up my beer.

"And maybe it isn't." He paused to see if anyone was listening in, then went on. "Don't you think it's kind of strange that someone from Hannover can't tell me the name of the biggest hotel in the city?"

"You got me. What is it?"

"I don't know. Never been there." A cunning grin. "But she didn't know either, and that's the point. Oh, she's German, all right, and so is her cousin ... if that really is her cousin. The question is, which side of Checkpoint Charlie are they from?"

Now he had my interest. "You think they might be from East Germany?"

"That would explain why she couldn't answer my question, wouldn't it?" He cocked his head toward the room. "I happened to overhear the two of you talking, and when I heard that kraut accent of hers I came by to see what was going on. When she asked you why you're here, that's when I stepped in."

"Oh, c'mon." I shook my head. "It was just a friendly question."

"No, I don't think so." Arnault hesitated. "Floyd, there's a lot about this mission that you don't know, but believe me, there's good reasons why there might be red spies hanging around. And if that's what they are, we need to find out for sure."

All this was just a little too paranoid for me. I knew guys who'd spout John Birch Society nonsense about commie infiltrators at the drop of a red hat, and what Arnault was saying sounded like more of the same. Arnault must have read the expression on my face. "You're going to help me, ensign," he added. "Consider that an order."

"Yes, sir." I put down my beer, but didn't get off the stool. "What would you like me to do, sir?"

Either he didn't catch my sarcasm or he simply chose to ignore it. "Did she say where they're staying?"

"They've rented a house just south of town. That's all she told me."

"Hmm . . ." He thought it over a moment. "Well, I caught a glimpse of their car, and there can't be that many red '52 Buicks on the island." He pushed back from the bar. "C'mon . . . we're going to take a walk and see if we can spot where they've parked it."

Find the car, find the house; the logic made sense, even if the motive didn't. I took a last slug of beer, then reluctantly got off the barstool. "Then what?"

"Then we see if we can figure out what they're doing here." As if he hadn't decided already.

It was dark when we left the restaurant, and there was no one on the streets. The grocery store had closed for the night, as had the few other shops, and only one lonely streetlight illuminated the center of town. There weren't even any sidewalks to roll up.

We didn't tell the others where we were going or why, and I was just as happy that we hadn't. I didn't want to have egg on my face when it turned out that the lieutenant's communist spies were nothing but some birdwatchers on vacation. I just hoped that we'd get this nonsense over and done with before Captain Gerrard noticed we were missing.

The sky was overcast, with thick clouds shrouding the quarter moon, but it was easy to see where we were going. A lighthouse rose from the beach south of Matthew Town; every few seconds its revolving beam turned our way, showing us the twigs, branches, and palm seeds that the storm had torn from the trees. After a mile or so we left the town behind and found ourselves on a narrow beachside road, with an occasional house here and there overlooking the ocean.

We had almost reached the lighthouse when we came upon a two-story wood-frame house built on a low rise across the road from the beach. There were lights in the ground floor windows, but the upstairs was dark; as we came closer, we saw a car port half-hidden behind scrub brush and Spanish bayonet. We went a little way up the driveway, trying to walk lightly upon the gravel and broken seashells, and sure enough, there was the red Buick the lieutenant had seen drive away from the restaurant.

Seeking cover in the bushes, we crept close enough to the house that we could peer through a side window. We saw what looked like a dining room. An older man, thick-set and with grey hair combed back from his temples, sat at a table that had been set for a late dinner; I assumed this was Alex, Helga and Kurt's American friend. His back was half-turned to us and he appeared to be talking to someone in another room. We couldn't hear what was being said, but a moment later Helga appeared, carrying a casserole dish in a pair of oven mitts. She carefully placed the dish on the table, then turned around and walked away again, probably returning to the kitchen.

"I don't see Kurt," I whispered.

"If they're getting ready to eat, he's probably downstairs." Arnault pointed to the back of the house. "Let's look around there," he said, and then began making his way through the bushes.

In the rear of the house was a set of outside stairs leading to a small second-floor porch. Without hesitation, Arnault left the bushes and quickly made for the stairs. Reaching them, he turned to urgently gesture for me to follow him. The last thing I

wanted to do was sneak into a house, especially when its tenants were there, but the lieutenant wasn't giving me any choice. I swore under my breath, then moved to join him.

The wooden stairs were weatherbeaten and a little rickety; the first couple of steps creaked under our shoes until we put most of our weight upon the railing. We carefully made our way up to the porch, where Arnault stopped to test the knob of the door leading inside. The door was unlocked; he eased it open, revealing a darkness broken only by a sullen blue glow from some distant source. He entered the house and, even though it felt as if my heart was going to hammer its way through my ribs, I followed him.

We found ourselves in a upstairs hallway, with a nearby staircase leading down to the first floor. Closed doors were to either side of us, and straight ahead was another room; its door was ajar, and coming through the crack was the dim light that provided us with what little illumination we had. The light flickered a bit, and I figured that it must be coming from a TV someone had left on.

Unintelligible conversation from downstairs, broken by the scrape of chair legs across a wooden floor, told us that Helga, Kurt, and Alex were sitting down for dinner. I could only hope that they took their time savoring Helga's casserole as Arnault and I tiptoed down the hall, drawn like moths toward the light at its end.

The door made a soft groan as the lieutenant pushed it open, and for a second it seemed as if the voices coming from downstairs had faltered a little. But then Arnault gave a low gasp; I looked past him, and all else was suddenly forgotten.

I was right about the light; it was coming from a screen. Four of them, in fact, arranged in a semicircle upon two wooden desks pulled together to form a shallow V. But they weren't TVs, or at least not like any I'd seen on sale at Sears.

"Holy smokes!" Arnault whispered as he slowly walked into the room. "Willya look at that!"

I was looking, all right . . . and I was having a hard time believing what I was seeing. The two center screens displayed what, at first glance, appeared to be high-altitude camera images like those taken by a U2 spy plane. But nothing the Air Force or CIA put in the sky had ever produced pictures like these; they resembled photographic negatives, with the colors reversed, but even those colors were strangely accented with unnatural shades of green, red, and blue, making them look like weird cartoons. Although the images were obviously taken from a height, their magnification was much better than any aerial photos I'd ever seen.

And they moved.

On the right screen was what seemed to be a jungle clearing. Infantry trucks were parked in a row at one side of the open space, with a longer row of tank trucks lined up behind them. Across the way was a large shed that might have been a tobacco barn were it not for the flatbed truck slowly backing up it. A long, narrow cylinder with a cone at one end rested on the back of the truck; the tiny figures of men slowly walked on either side of the vehicle while others patrolled the edges of the clearing, evidently watching the surrounding jungle.

The left screen showed something even more chilling. An ocean harbor, with a freighter docked at a wharf. The ship's cargo hold was open, and a mobile crane parked on the wharf appeared to be raising something from belowdecks. As I watched, the crane moved just enough for me to make out what it was lifting from the freighter: another cylindrical shape, much like the one on the other screen.

"God damn." Arnault's voice was low but hoarse with anger. "God damn!" He pointed at the two screens. "That's Cuba, and those are Soviet missiles!"

I barely paid attention to him; I was looking at something else. The screens themselves had caught my interest; they didn't look like normal cathode-ray tubes but instead were as flat as cafeteria trays, with no visible buttons or switches. The screens

bookending the middle two were dark, but when I stepped closer, the one on the far left suddenly lit up to display a row of tiny symbols arranged against a background that fluctuated like a small aurora.

On the desktops below the left and right screens were what appeared at first to be a pair of small portable typewriters. There were no rollers in them, though, and when I bent to examine each more closely, I saw that, while their keyboards had the familiar QWERT YUIOP arrangement, the keys themselves were as flat as if they'd been painted on a glass surface, with a double row of buttons above them.

Looking at them, I was reminded of something I'd seen once before: the Enigma code-making machine used by the Germans during World War II. That looked a little like a typewriter, too, but it wasn't. It was a computer. Could this be . . . ?

"I told you so." Arnault was still staring at the two middle screens. "This is a red spy nest. Some sort of observation post."

I ignored him as I glanced behind the desks. No wires or cables; what was the power source? I was still puzzling over that when I noticed a plastic sheet about the size of a notebook page on the left desk next to the keyboard. I picked it up, and almost dropped it again as it glowed with a light of its own, exposing another row of tiny symbols against a shifting background. I experimentally touched one of the symbols; the page instantly changed, this time to show another aerial view: a different jungle clearing, now in broad daylight, with tiny soldiers erecting what appeared to be an anti-aircraft missile launcher.

"This stuff isn't from Russia," I murmured, hearing my voice tremble. "It's not from East Germany either. This is . . . something else."

"I don't care where it's from. I know missiles when I see 'em . . ."

"At night?" I pointed to the right center screen. "Look at that truck and those people. They're moving, lieutenant. That's not a still picture . . . this is happening right now, while we're watching. Do the reds have that kind of . . .?"

The door creaked behind us.

My heart stopped beating, and I'd just turned around when the ceiling light suddenly came on. I winced against the abrupt glare, but not before I saw Helga, Kurt, and Alex standing in the doorway.

For a long moment, both groups stared at one another in dumb surprise. I flashed back to when I was a kid and my father caught me stealing a quarter from his bedroom dresser; the look on my face must have been the same.

This time, Helga played my dad's role. "Floyd . . . what are you doing here?" she asked, more shocked than angry.

"Is this the man you were talking about?" Alex's hand was still on the wall switch. Helga nodded, and he glared at us. "You're trespassing," he said, stating the obvious.

"And you're Russian spies!" Arnault snapped, as if a blunt accusation would justify our intrusion.

Alex's mouth fell open, Kurt rapidly blinked, and Helga simply stared at him. Then Helga raised a hand to her mouth, but not quite fast enough to hide her giggle. Kurt and Alex traded a glance, then Kurt's eyes rolled up as Alex tried to control the amused grin that threatened to spread across his face.

"No . . . no, we're not Russian spies." Alex relaxed a little, letting his hand drop from the light switch. "I assure you, we . . ."

"Then what's all this?" Arnault jabbed a finger at the screens. "Tell me those aren't pictures of Soviet rockets in Cuba!"

That quickly sobered up the three of them. This was no longer funny. Meanwhile, I felt like I was the only person in the room who didn't know what was going on. "Lieutenant," I asked, "what makes you think the Russians are putting missiles in Cuba?"

Arnault barely glanced at me. "We've received intelligence that Ivan may be shipping nukes to Cuba," he said, not taking his eyes off Helga, Kurt, and Alex. "That's what our mission is: to gather any evidence that the reports are true." A corner of his mouth lifted slightly. "I think we've got all the proof we need right here."

I looked at the screens again. The view of the Cuban harbor was still there, but the image on the center-right screen had changed. It now displayed what appeared to be a beach; in the nearby jungle, an anti-aircraft missile launcher was being covered by camouflage netting. It seemed to be the same shot as the one in the plastic sheet still in my hand, but this time it had the same photo-negative appearance as the earlier images. I realized that they were from an apparent altitude of only a few hundred feet. That was much lower than our blimp could go without being seen, but the people on the ground were apparently unaware that they were being observed.

"Lieutenant, this isn't Russian equipment." I picked up one of the keyboards, held it out for him to see. "They can't even make a decent toaster, for heaven's sake."

"They're pretty good at building rockets!"

"Never mind that. Have you ever seen TVs like those before? Or—" I put down the keyboard, and picked up the weird sheet of plastic. "—whatever this is? Man, even NASA doesn't have stuff like this!"

Looking away from the three people at the door, Arnault turned his head slightly to examine the equipment on the desks. For the first time, he seemed to notice something besides the missiles. "Those could be aerial photos . . ."

"At night? At the same time that things are happening on the ground?" A new thought occurred to me. I turned to Helga. "This is . . . this is from space, isn't it?"

She reluctantly nodded. "We're using satellites, yes . . . ones far more sophisticated than any your country or the Soviet Union now has. High resolution radar imaging . . ."

"Don't be too specific," Alex said quietly.

"No, of course not," Helga said. "But Floyd's right. The Soviet Union does not possess technology of this kind, and neither does East Germany." She hesitated. "No one will . . . at least, not for some time to come."

"Helga . . ." Kurt cast a warning look at her.

"Let her speak," Alex said. "The truth is no worse than the accusation." He frowned at Kurt. "Besides, this is your fault, for leaving the porch door unlocked. I asked you not to do that." Kurt's face reddened as Alex turned to Helga again. "Go on."

Helga took a deep breath. "We're observers. Not spies, simply . . . observers. I won't tell you where we're from, other than to say that it's not a place that exists in this frame of time."

"Observers," I repeated, and then I remembered something the lieutenant had said just before we were discovered. "Then . . . this is an observation post, I guess."

She smiled slightly. "That's a good way of putting it. We established this place for the purpose of watching and recording everything that will occur, or may occur, at this particular point in . . ."

"What do you mean, 'will or may occur'?" Arnault raised an eyebrow. "Is there something we should know?" Kurt muttered something under his breath that may have been obscene, and Helga went pale as if she'd suddenly realized that she may have said too much. "The missiles," the lieutenant went on. "This has to do with them, doesn't it?"

"It does, yes." Now it was Alex's turn to be both reticent and informative. "There are . . . certain points in time, shall we say? . . . when human existence hangs in the balance and its future depends upon the actions of a few. This is one of those occasions. But even so, all the pertinent facts are not always recorded. Because of this, later generations are left to discover how things might have happened differently if the situation had changed even just a little."

"History is malleable," Helga said, "because time itself is not linear. Any deviation, no matter how slight, can have enormous consequences, which in turn can lead to the creation of parallel timelines in which . . ."

"Look, I don't care about any of that." Arnault was becoming impatient; I'm not sure he even listened at all. "The only thing that matters is that the Russians are stockpiling missiles on Cuba, and those missiles may have nuclear warheads."

Something cold went down my spine. "Is this true?" I asked. "Do those things have nukes?"

"Hell, yes!" The lieutenant regarded me as if I was an idiot. "What would be the point of positioning rockets within sixty miles of our country if they didn't have nuclear warheads?" He glared at the other three people in the room. "Maybe you're not Russians, but that doesn't change a thing. I have to tell my people what's going on!"

He began to walk toward the door. Alex stepped in front of him. "You can't do that . . ."

Arnault halted, looked him straight in the eye. "Don't tell me what I can't do."

"If anyone else learns what you know, it will cause . . ." Alex hesitated. "Look, I can't reveal to you what's going to happen, but I can say that any changes to this timeline may be catastrophic. If you—"

"Get out of my way." Arnault took another step forward, and Alex raised his hands to stop him. Bad move; the lieutenant had the same training in hand-to-hand combat as I did. Arnault grabbed his arm with both hands, and in the next second Alex was on the floor, gasping in pain from the judo throw Arnault had used on him. Kurt started to move, then froze as the lieutenant whirled toward him. The two men stared at each other, then Arnault stepped over Alex and calmly walked out the door.

Helga turned to me. "Floyd, you can't let this happen."

I was stunned by what I'd just seen, unable to move. "I . . . I . . ."

"Floyd . . . listen to me." Helga rushed across the room to grab me by the shoulders. "What I've said is true," she went on, dropping her voice so that Arnault couldn't hear her. "We've seen the outcome in other timelines. If your president learns too early that there are Soviet missiles on Cuba, it will prompt him to launch an invasion or a preemptive air attack. But he doesn't know how many missiles are already there or their exact locations. And the Russian premier has given his officers in Cuba permission to use tactical missiles against an invasion force, or to launch intermediate-range missiles at the U.S. if there's an air strike."

"You know what will occur if that happens," Alex said. Kurt was helping him off the floor; he winced as he massaged his twisted right forearm. "Kennedy will order a retaliatory nuclear strike against the Soviet Union, Khrushchev will respond by launching Russia's strategic missiles . . ."

"Millions will die." Helga's eyes were locked on mine. "The world as you know it will be destroyed. *We've seen it happen.*"

I was having trouble breathing, and my legs felt weak. From the other end of the hallway, I heard the porch door slam open, Arnault's footsteps trotting down the back stairs. "Why . . . why can't you . . .?"

"We cannot interfere." Kurt was apologetic but almost laughably calm, as if he was informing me that I had an overdue book at the library. "No matter what happens, we're prohibited from taking any actions ourselves." He looked at Alex and shook his head. "We've done too much already. When we visit critical events such as this . . ."

"Go." Helga shook my arms, trying to snap me out of my shock. "For the sake of everyone you know and love . . . *stop him!*"

I pushed her aside, hurried to the door. I no longer heard Arnault's shoes on the stairs; when I reached the back porch, a passing beam from the lighthouse captured him for a second as he marched down the driveway.

I nearly fell down the stairs in my haste, but the lieutenant had already made it to

the road by the time I caught up with him. "Lieutenant, wait!" I yelled, but he didn't stop or turn around. "Just stop, will you? We can't . . .!"

I laid a hand on his shoulder, and he whipped about to face me. "What do you want?"

"We . . . we . . ." I was gasping for breath. "We can't do this. If we tell them . . ."

"Ensign Moore . . . *at attention!*"

Training took over. I snapped rigid, back straight, hands at sides, legs together. He stepped closer, so close that I could feel his breath on my face. The searchlight passed over us again, and I saw his eyes only inches from mine.

"Ensign Moore, you are a seaman in the United States Navy. Is this correct?"

"Yes, sir."

"I can't hear you!"

"Yes, sir!"

"As a Navy seaman, you are sworn to protect your country. Is this correct?"

"Yes, sir!"

"As your superior officer, I order you to fulfill your oath. We will go to the blimp, where you will provide me with the means to send a coded priority message to NAVINT, informing them of what we've discovered! Do you understand?"

"Yes, sir!"

"Outstanding." He stepped back, turned away from me. "Follow me."

The ray from the lighthouse passed above us again, and in that instant I saw, on the side of the road, a tree branch that had been knocked down by the storm. There was no hesitation; I knew what I had to do.

I bent over and picked up the branch. It was about the size of a baseball bat and just as solid. I grasped it with both hands and swung it at the back of the lieutenant's head. There was a hollow crack as I felt it connect. Arnault grunted and staggered forward, but before he could react or even turn around, I raised the branch above me, rushed toward him, and slammed it straight down on his skull. He gasped and fell, but he'd barely hit the ground before I brought the branch down upon his head again.

And again.

And again.

The next time the light touched us, I saw that he was dying. He lay face-down in the road, arms stretched out. There was blood all over the back of his head, and it turned the pavement black as it flowed out from under him. I couldn't see his face, but I could hear a rattling rasp as he struggled for his last breath. I raised the branch again, but didn't strike him; instead, I watched as his hands twitched a couple of times, then there was a soft sigh and he was still.

I was still staring at him when Helga touched my elbow. "I'm sorry," she whispered. "I'm so, so sorry . . ."

I nodded. Then I dropped the branch, went over to the side of the road, and threw up.

History records that only a handful of lives were lost during the Cuban Missile Crisis: the pilot of the American U2 that was shot down over Cuba by a Soviet anti-aircraft battery, and the Russian soldiers who died when the truck carrying them went off a mountain road and rolled down an embankment.

There was another casualty, though: U.S. Naval Intelligence Officer Lt. Robert Arnault. But he is not counted among the dead.

Helga took me back to the house, where she let me clean up in the bathroom while she washed the bloodstains from my shirt. There was a bottle of scotch in the kitchen; I poured myself a double, no chaser.

Kurt and Alex returned a little while later. I noticed that they'd taken off their shoes and rolled up their pants legs, and that their bare feet were covered with sand. They told me what they'd done with Arnault's body and how they had thrown the

branch into the woods and washed his blood off the road with buckets of sea water carried up from the beach. They'd also come up with an alibi; it sounded plausible to me, and we went over it a few times until I had it thoroughly memorized. I had another drink—because I needed it, and also because it was part of my alibi—and then I put on my shirt and left the house.

The hour was late by the time I walked back into Matthew Town; the restaurant was closed, and the streets were quiet. A poker game was going on in someone's room at the guest house, but no one saw me when I came in. Handsome Jimmy was snoring loudly when I let myself into the room we shared, and he didn't wake up as I undressed in the dark and climbed into bed.

It took a long time for me to fall asleep.

Captain Gerrard woke the crew up shortly after sunrise, going from room to room to knock on the door. It was then that Lt. Arnault's absence was noticed; his bed was unmade, and his duffel bag was untouched. Everyone remembered that he and I had left the bar together, so the captain came to me and asked if I had seen him lately.

I told the skipper that Arnault had become interested in a girl we'd met in the bar, and that the two of us followed her back to the house where she was staying with her cousin and a friend. I hadn't wanted to go with him, I explained, but it seemed like the lieutenant had a little too much to drink, and so I'd gone along to make sure that he stayed out of trouble. Unfortunately, that's exactly what happened; Arnault made a scene when he caught up with Helga, insisting that she come back to the bar with him, until Kurt and Alex threw him out of the house. I'd remained behind to apologize, and ended up staying awhile to have a few drinks. I hadn't seen the lieutenant after that . . . why, was there something wrong?

Captain Gerrard called the Matthew Town police and told them that a member of his crew was missing. About an hour later, the police chief came to the guest house with shocking news: the lieutenant was dead, his body discovered on the beach just outside of town. It appeared that someone had beaten him to death, then dragged his body to the waterside. Two sets of footprints in the sand attested to the fact that he'd been attacked by two people, probably while walking back to town; his watch was missing, and although his wallet was found on the beach, there was no cash in it. The police figured that he'd probably put up a fight, and the robbers had murdered him.

Since I was the last person to see the lieutenant alive, I had to repeat my story several times; I'd have to do so again, in front of a Navy board of inquiry charged with investigating the lieutenant's murder. I had my alibi down pat and I was careful never to deviate from it, and so I never came under suspicion. And when the police went out to the house, the three vacationing birdwatchers verified everything that I had said; the lieutenant had made a pass at Helga, and so Kurt and Alex had made him leave, but let me stay a while because Helga liked me.

The killers were never found, but that didn't surprise anyone in Matthew Town. There was very little crime on Great Inagua, but when it occurred, it was usually blamed on one of the Haitian boat people who periodically came over from Hispaniola. That was a common explanation in the Bahamas: whenever there was an un-

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solved crime, a Haitian was always responsible. The Navy investigation eventually reached the same conclusion; Lt. Arnault had simply been in the wrong place at the wrong time, and the men who'd killed him had only been after his watch and money.

Less than two weeks after the lieutenant's death, President Kennedy learned that the U.S.S.R. had placed nuclear-tipped missiles on Cuba. Over the next nine days, America and Russia played a dangerous contest of wits, each poised to start a war no one could win. In the end, Kennedy and Khrushchev—two men who had seen war firsthand and knew its consequences—managed to persevere over the hawks on both sides to reach a diplomatic solution: in exchange for a promise that the U.S. would cease its attempts to remove Castro from power and respect Cuba's sovereign status, the U.S.S.R. would remove its missiles from Cuba.

The *Centurion* returned to Key West long before that happened. It flew only once more, to watch for Russian submarines off the Atlantic Coast during the crisis. The following month, the Navy decided to ground its blimps for good. So the *Centurion* was deflated for the last time, and its car eventually made its way to an aviation museum in Connecticut. I was transferred to the U.S.S. *Lexington*, where I worked as a communications officer before leaving the service a few years later.

I was given an honorable discharge. The irony of this hasn't been lost on me. But I never told anyone what I did that night, even though it haunted me for years to come.

Did I do the right thing? I'd like to think so, if only because it's helped me deal with my conscience. But something Helga told me that night has stayed with me as much as the murder itself.

History is malleable, she said, *because time itself is not linear*. This implies that there was—there *is*—more than one outcome to the events of October 1962. Have those alternatives—which Helga claimed to have actually seen—hinged upon what I did or did not do? Or was the lieutenant's death merely an incident that had no lasting consequences?

I'll never know. But there is this:

I'd moved to a small town outside Colorado Springs several years back, and a few days ago I went into the city to visit my doctor. My son drove me there; he's taken care of me since my wife died, and he had a few errands of his own. After I got through at the doctor's office, I walked down the street to a restaurant where I was to meet my son for lunch. My illness hasn't totally bedridden me yet, although I have to depend on a walker and an oxygen tank to get around.

It was midday and the sidewalks were crowded, mainly with office workers on their way to one place or another. I'd almost reached the restaurant when the front door of an apartment building swung open and a young woman walked out.

It was Helga. Of this, I'm absolutely certain; I've never forgotten her face, even after all these years. And although her hairstyle had changed and she was wearing a business suit, she hadn't aged a day. It was as if she'd come straight from Great Inagua with only a quick stop at a fashion shop and hairdresser along the way.

She didn't recognize me, of course. I was just a sick old man, bent over a walker with an oxygen line clipped to his nose. She strolled past me and was gone before I could say anything.

So she's here, in our time. But why?

Consider this: NORAD, the North American Aerospace Defense Command, has its headquarters at Cheyenne Mountain, just outside Colorado Springs. Since 1966, the Air Force has directed American strategic defense operations from an underground complex deep within the mountain. If a global nuclear war were to break out, this would be one of the first places to know.

Perhaps it may only be a coincidence that I've seen Helga again. Or perhaps it may not. I'm afraid I may live long enough to learn for certain. O

Harold Gets Off on the Doppler Effect

Harold, the Andersons' part shepherd, is allowed just enough open window to get his snout and lower jaw out into the moving air, when he so willingly piles into the rear seat of their SUV for even the slightest jaunt outside the confines of his small world.

And then, always, like clockwork, he opens up and lets out one mournful howl.

The floppy ears of Harold, evolved back in the day, can just make out that telltale shift of sounds that Christian Doppler thought to name, to shed some light on distances to twinkling stars too far to ever visit.

Harold, unlike his human captors, can recognize the meaning of it all.

It's a tap into infinity, is all. Harold keeps this to himself, of course. The pattern of his bounced back croon tells him that humans like good old Christian D. missed the point when we reduced the stars to numbers and the outdoors to a car ride.

Alas, poor Harold also knows his limits, and settles for a nice chew on his leather toy, smiling sadly as the wind passes him by.

—James Kamlet



D.O.C.S.

Neal Barrett, Jr.

Of his latest story, the author says . . .

Dear Reader:

This is just science fiction. That means it hasn't happened yet. Keep your eyes on all national issues concerning Health, and hope it's only a story.

—Neal Barrett, Jr.

Bobby heard them coming. Heard them way off 'cause he had good ears, good as anyone in town. Saw them when they passed Blessed Bend. Saw the great Daimler-Dodge as it thundered up the hill. Heard the big twin V12s rattle every dish in town.

It was a scary thing to see, and scariest of all was the color of the thing, that pale and putrid shade of pond scum, rot, snot, something you'd stepped on, something gone bad. There was nothing shiny, nothing bright, nothing but the words they'd painted on the door:

DEPARTMENT OF CURATIVE SCIENCE

You could read it, if you got up close, but Jesus Brown, who'd want to do that?

Bobby felt the hairs stand up on his neck. He'd be thirteen next week, and didn't much recall being eight. Still, he remembered that big, heavy hunk of ugly grinding into town. He remembered Mom was sick. He remembered how it rained that year. Mostly, though, he remembered the night that Grandpa died.

He remembered it still, every night since. He could see the look in Grandpa's eyes, like he might see something no one else could see.

Bobby crept down the gully, keeping out of sight. At the house, he climbed the back porch, ran through the hall and into the kitchen. Mom and Daddy were huddled 'round the window watching the sight below.

"Docs," said Bobby real soft, "saw 'em coming up the bend."

"We got eyes too," Daddy said, in that voice that went flat sometimes. "Sit down, boy, and be quiet."

Bobby did as he was told. He saw Mom's hand was squeezed tight in Daddy's big fist. Mom was scared a lot since the 'fliction got her down. Holding Daddy helped sometimes.

Leaning up some, Bobby could see the big van, squatting like a toad on the com-mon by the road. He did like Daddy said, kept still and watched.

It seemed like forever till a door slid open and the first one stepped out. Right then, Mom made a little noise like a mouse kind of hurt behind the wall. Daddy stilled her with a gentle "hush, now," and helped her settle down.

The next one came out, then another, and another after that. Some of them were tall, some were short and fat. To Bobby, they all looked the same. Nine, even if you

counted twice. Each had a gown that hung to his shoes, dead-white gloves, spooky-lookin' caps, and little green masks so you couldn't see his eyes.

Nine, Aunt Deny told him, was a number that never brought good. That's all she said and she didn't say why . . .

"Lord-god-christ-oh-god-lord-god-christ-a-mighty!"

Mom shouted and her eyes went funny and her hands began to twitch. Daddy picked her up quick and took her down the hall. Bobby heard him talking to her soft. She'd be all right for a spell after that.

Doktr James said Mom was doing fine, but every time it hit her, Bobby's stomach tightened up again. She still wasn't Mom all the time.

When Daddy came back, he laid his hand on Bobby's arm and squeezed it real tight. Daddy almost never did that. He sat with Bobby and watched out the window, not saying anything at all.

Bobby tried to keep still, but he couldn't hold it back. His head was too full of stuff for that.

"Daddy, is Mom all right? She going to be—"

Daddy looked right at him, held his gaze a minute then quickly looked away.

"They're going at it fast down there," he said. "Sit still and watch that."

Daddy was right. Down by the door, everything was moving, moving like a blur. A door slid back, one he hadn't seen before. Big, shiny black chairs, long black tables, they all flew out the door, legs springing out 'fore they even hit the ground.

Then, half a dozen men came marching 'round the van with bundles, bales, boxes and bags. Cases, canisters, parcels and stacks. Heaps, piles, barrels and sacks.

Bobby figured they were done, but there was more after that: Shiny green machines, gizmos, gadgets, things that were square, things that were round, things that had no shape at all. Things that might cut, pinch, puncture, and poke. Sharp, ugly stuff that made him feel dizzy in his head.

Then came men with scary-looking boxes, boxes with wires going in and coming out. Red lights, blue lights, lights winking bright. Boxes with windows like pale green eyes.

Bobby felt a bad taste in his mouth. Daddy said 'lectrical shit came from the city, said it didn't do our folk any good at all.

Bobby knew the men who carried stuff were people like anyone else. They didn't wear green, didn't talk or look around, didn't get to ride in the big docs' van. Did as they were told, did what the docs said.

"You stay right here," Daddy said. "Look after your mother. I'm going out a second to talk with Uncle Teal."

Bobby's heart nearly stopped. He didn't want Daddy to go, wanted him to stay right there. Daddy saw what he was thinking, told him he'd be right back, said everything was fine. Bobby felt his eyes fill, looked away fast. Prayed Daddy didn't see that.

Still, he knew going down to Uncle Teal's was a good thing to do. Uncle Teal was aware of things. That meant he knew things a lot of people didn't. It was Uncle Teal who'd raised him while Daddy watched Grandpa die. It was Mom's daddy dying, but Daddy's job to see him gone. Uncle Teal said that's what daddies did.

Waiting for Daddy, leaning out close, he could see the town doktrs lined up near the van. Five, now, since Doktr Himes had passed on. Bander wasn't big, like Endoe or Hidecker Flats. Still, some towns didn't have anyone at all. When the doktr at Crow died sudden in June, there was no one to call.

Doktr Hugh James, who took care of Mom, told Bobby once, the way things were in our country right now, a doktr wasn't a good thing to be.

"I wouldn't want you repeating that," he told Bobby real low, "but I wish I hadn't been a doc at all." Bobby noticed he called himself "doc." Knew he wasn't supposed to, but he did.

Bobby didn't know a whole lot when the docs had come before. What happened to Grandpa was all he could handle in his head. This time, Doktr James told him what was going on, told him what he'd see.

Just like he said, docs sat behind the black tables in the big black chairs, sat there facing the doktrs from town. Doktrs had to write everything down, Doktr James said. Every single thing about their patients in town.

It was pretty clear to Bobby folks on one side didn't much care for those on the other. If they didn't have to talk, they didn't say anything at all.

After a while, Doktr James and the others got up and walked off, talking among themselves.

The men who carried stuff had set up a tent where patients waited inside. Bobby knew that's where they'd taken the gizmos and gadgets from the van.

"It's for testing things in the body," Doktr James had said. "There's all kinds of instruments for that."

"Shiny things to help people with?" Bobby asked.

"Oh, yes. Lots of good things. You can listen to a person's heart, see if it's beating all right."

"You can?"

"Sure can. And you can look inside a person, see if there's anything wrong in there. If something's really bad, you can go right in and take it out."

"Lord, that'd hurt real bad."

"No, Bobby, you'd be sound asleep while they were doing that."

Bobby was real proud to learn all this. And proud of Doktr James as well. He wondered why he'd told Bobby he didn't like doing what he did. Seemed like he'd be pretty proud, too.

As Bobby watched from the window, the docs from the van joined the doktrs and their patients inside. "It must be a wonder in there," Bobby said aloud, looking 'round quick to see if Daddy was there. Daddy'd whip him good if he caught him thinking stuff like that.

He was tired of sitting in the kitchen, but Mom was making a fuss. He wouldn't leave her like that. He hoped Daddy'd come back soon. Maybe Uncle Teal had something real important to say. Maybe he could tell Bobby stuff he didn't know.

Bobby nearly jumped out of his skin as a loud, painful wail came from the common below. Leaning out far, he saw a frightful sight outside the big tent.

Five, six people were bunched up together throwing an awful fit. Four men, two women: one, young Miss Harder—Bobby knew she worked at the store—was crying her eyes out, pulling her hair. The other lady just stood there and stared. Two of the men kind of stumbled about. The other one fell and flopped on the ground.

Jacob Felstoker, who ran the corner store, didn't cry, didn't stare, didn't stumble about. What he did was turn away and stomp back inside.

For a moment, it seemed like the world had gone still, like the quiet before a storm.

"Lord A-Mighty!" said Bobby, hardly breathing at all. He'd never even dreamed anything as exciting as this. He wondered if Daddy was watching too.

Then, all of a sudden, a blast of angry voices broke the silence. Men cursed, shouted, bellowed, and roared. It seemed as if the tent might shake and blow away. Jacob Felstoker lunged from the tent with two frightened docs, holding them by their collars,

long gowns flailing in the air. Shoving one aside, he pounded the other with two big fists, sent him sprawling on his back, finished him off with a hearty kick in the ribs.

Bobby hardly knew Felstoker, but he wanted to stand and shout, cheer him for what he'd done.

Someone shouted, and a dozen men poured out of the tent, fell on Jacob, and beat him to the ground. Jacob threw them off, came to his feet, and took out two or three before they brought him down for good.

In a moment, it was over. Deputy Gole appeared, cuffed Felstoker, and dragged him bodily away.

"Boy, get away from there, right *now!*" Daddy said, jerking Bobby roughly to his feet. "That isn't your business down there!"

Bobby knew he was right, but he sure was glad he hadn't missed the fight.

"There isn't a thing you can do," said Uncle Teal. "Things are what they are in this country, Will, and there isn't any changing it now."

"Tell *that* to Jacob and the others," Daddy said, pounding his fist on the table. "Jesus Jones, it wasn't always like this. How did we let 'em do it? They've 'bout took everything away!"

"Folks like us don't make the rules. I don't have to tell you that. Your family—"

"You know people," Daddy said, cutting him off. "People who can get things done. You know there's ways."

"Not with them, there's not." Uncle Teal's voice went flat. "And you got no business asking, Will Graham. No business at all . . ."

Mom started crying then, and Daddy sent Bobby to quiet her down. When he tried to go back, Daddy had shut the door tight. Daddy and Uncle Teal got louder again, before they settled down.

Bobby didn't sleep at all. He didn't think Daddy did either. Mom was making little sounds, like she did all the time.

In the morning, Uncle Teal was still there. He and Daddy looked awful, worn out from the night. Bobby ate their bacon and toast. There wasn't any coffee, and Daddy was sore about that.

"I'll go see Deputy Gole," said Uncle Teal. "I don't figure the docs'll charge Jacob. They don't want trouble with the town."

Daddy laughed, and it wasn't a funny laugh at all. "They want to make *friends* with the town? I got some ideas about that."

Uncle Teal left. He and Daddy were close, but Daddy seemed glad to see him go. It wasn't a workday, and Daddy stayed home. He stayed with Mom some, paced up and down, and didn't talk to Bobby at all.

Bobby did his best to clean up, without making any noise. He heated up soup, but Mom and Daddy wouldn't eat a thing. Bobby felt bad about eating theirs too.

Late that afternoon, he looked out at the van. They were folding up tables and chairs, loading up the stuff they'd brought in.

"Well, they'll be gone in a while," Daddy said. "Won't see the bastards for another couple years. That's soon enough for me."

Bobby was surprised. Daddy didn't use bad words a whole lot, but he meant it when he did.

"Miss Harder and the others, where they going to go? They going to be okay?"

Daddy frowned. "They're not going anywhere, son. They'll be right here where they were."

Bobby was confused. "But they're scared, aren't they? Them and Mr. Feldstoker. They got real scared, I saw 'em out there."

Daddy motioned to Bobby, and Bobby sat down. "This is something we need to talk about, boy. In a year or two, maybe, but not right now. What I think, is, you've got too much about this in your head right now. Later on—"

Someone knocked. Daddy grinned, got up, told Bobby to stay right there. "Damn fool," he said, "When did you start knocking, Teal?"

Daddy answered, and his smile died away. A tall, hefty doc in his mask, cap, and long gown stood at the door. Behind him stood two of the men who carried things to the van. Standing well out of the way was Doktr James. One look at him gave Daddy a chill. The doktr looked sick, shaky on his feet. All the color had drained from his face. "What is it," Daddy said, "that you want here?"

"Mr. Will Graham?" the doc said.

"What?"

"Celia Graham, Mrs. Will Graham?"

Daddy looked at Doktr James. "What is it? What do these people want?"

"I—think they have to come in, Will. I'm sorry, they need to talk. Nothing I can—"

"Talk right here," Bobby's daddy said.

"What?"

"You heard me, damn it, say what you got to say."

Bobby was up, now, right behind Daddy out of sight.

The doc's face was hidden, but Bobby could see his eyes.

"This is official business, Mr. Graham. Invoking the Discontinuation Act, 0075, relative to the Corporeally-Impaired, the—"

"I know what it is," Daddy said. "What the hell does it have to do with me?"

"Watch your language, sir," said the doc.

"You watch yours, *doc*."

Bobby could smell his daddy's sweat. Something bad was going on. Bobby didn't like it at all.

"I'm afraid I have to take the blame for this," said Doktr James. "I . . . kept Mrs. Graham's name off the list. I saw no reason to put her there. I thought it was . . . something I could . . . take care of myself."

"You had no right to do so," said the doc. "Selective Procedures Inducing Possible Curativation is not your concern."

"I'm aware of that," said Doktr James. "Still—"

"I want you off my door," Daddy said, "right now." His words cut sharp as fine blades. For a moment, the doc looked shaken. The other men took a step toward Bobby's daddy, but Daddy didn't budge.

"Look, I don't want any trouble, but I don't have time for this," said the doc. "Lots of people need help, Graham. We can't help them all. If they can be helped, fine. We let them keep their local doktrs. If they can't, that's that."

"Mrs. Graham, among others, is denied furtherance of medical intervention. That's the rules. Action Number 4490—"

"You bas-bastard," Bobby screamed, "you killed my grandfather! You killed Grandpa, that's what you did!"

"He died," said the doc. "Some people live, a lot of people die."

That's when Bobby's daddy picked up the stick by the door he used to keep the rats away. . . .

Bobby sat back against the tree and looked up at the night. The sky was dark through the branches. There was no moon at all and hardly any stars. Down below the hill, he could see the lights of Hamberville. It was late, or early as it were, three in the morning or four.

He wished he could sleep, but there was no time for that. He hardly slept anyway,

now, even if he had nothing else to do. On this night, though, he did. After that, maybe sleep would come again.

He guessed it had been half a year since Mom had died, and less than that when Daddy passed on too. Uncle Teal said he just wasted away in jail, but Bobby figured it was something more than that. Docs had their ways, and likely thought Daddy owed them for taking one of their own.

He'd gone into town the night before, and knew his way around, knew his way clear, knew when the dogs barked, knew the big van was parked near the center of town. That's not where he wanted it to be, but the night was good, and Hamberville would do fine. He'd watched in Dokley, Old Lake, and Vicker, and Tracker 'fore that. Every time, something was wrong. Tonight, though, everything was right.

The storehouse door was unlocked, just like it ought to be. He carried the can until he was twenty yards from the van. One thing right about Hamberville, hadn't been good in most other towns. The men who worked for the docs slept four blocks away. Two guards were walking about, but the night was too dark to see.

Bobby found the ladder he'd left in the brush the night before. Leaning it up against the van, he carefully carried the can to the top. The vent that let air in and out was open to the night. Bobby could smell a mix of feet, food, green frocks, and farts.

He silently opened the can and began to pour the kerosene inside. It didn't take long for the men to notice what was wrong up there. They began to yell and scramble for the door. Bobby had taken care of that, wedging it solidly shut.

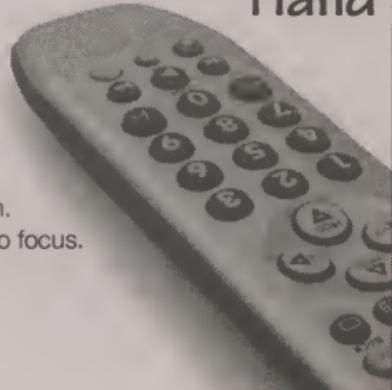
Lighting a twisted cloth, he dropped it in the vent, hurried down the ladder and off into the dark. Safely away, but close enough to listen to the shrieks, the howls, the terrible cries. He listened until there was nothing but silence from the van, then he faded back into the night.

Bobby knew he was wrong. That he'd done a terrible thing, that it wouldn't bring Grandpa or Daddy or Mom back to life, or any of the others the docs had left to die. Still, he figured it was better than not doing anything at all. That's what Daddy always said. Don't sit around—go about your business. Go do what you need to do. O

With this one I'm turning on the gas fireplace.
 With that one I'm changing the channel.
 With this one I'm putting on my pajamas.
 With that one I'm going back in time ten years.
 With this one I'm turning down the volume.
 With that one I'm changing the channel again.
 With this one I'm waking up the firefighters.
 With that one I'm improving the weather.
 With this one I'm Googling a new word.
 With that one I'm driving a car.
 With this one I'm losing my virginity.
 With that one I'm falling in love.
 With this one I'm cooking dinner.
 With that one I'm wiggling my son's loose tooth.
 With this one I'm bringing the constellations into focus.
 With that one I'm falling asleep angry.
 With this one I'm waking up hungry.
 With that one I'm ignoring you.

—Jessy Randall

I Have
 a Remote
 in Each
 Hand



OANILO

Carol Emshwiller

For her ninetieth birthday this past spring, PS Publishing presented Carol Emshwiller with a "double header"—two book collections combined as one in the old Ace Double style. When held one way, the book is called *In the Time of War*. Turned over and upside down and it becomes *Master of the Road to Nowhere*. While thematically different, both sides contain stories first published in our pages. The two covers feature beautiful paintings by Ed Emshwiller. Further celebration of the onset of Carol's ninth decade will include NonStop Press' imminent publication of her *Collected Stories, Vol 1*. Carol's recent tale, "The Lovely Ugly" (August 2010), tied for best short story in our annual Readers' Awards Poll. In her new story we discover that those who live on the margins of society may know more about the secrets of physics than all the scientists at CERN.

Lewella is pretending she's getting married. Of course to a stranger none of us knows. "Someone from the North," she says. He'll come for her in the spring. She has to have a trousseau. Especially things they don't have up north. But we mustn't go to any trouble. She'll only be able to take one small bag. Besides, she's not sure about what they don't have up north, anyway.

First of all, who would marry her? She's too old and she has a limp. Her hair is always flying off in all directions and it's mostly all white. Nobody around here would look at her twice. Nobody has so far.

"What's he look like?"

She has it all figured out. "Oh, not handsome."
(We guessed that already.)

"But I like his looks anyway. He's thin. He has a long nose. Like most men, he doesn't talk much and never about what you want to hear. Especially never about love. But even so he's very nice. Looks back to see if you're following along all right. Helps you up if you fall."

"What's his name?"

She's not ready for that question. You can see her thinking and then answering too quickly and—you can tell—blurting out a name she doesn't even like. "Don, I mean Dan. Uhh, Brown . . . lee. Brownlee."

She's mad at herself for not thinking up a name beforehand. "So," we say, "Dan Brownlee?"

"The Dan is short for his real first name."

"So what's his real name?"

"I'll ask him when I see him."

"But you said that wouldn't be until the wedding."

"He might come by before that."

She's set the date, ten days into April.

I gave her two old towels I was going to throw out. She didn't get the joke. She thanked me as if she really liked them. Right away she put them in the little bag where she's keeping the things for her trip north. Doesn't take much to make her happy, which doesn't bode well for Don—I mean Dan—Brownlee being anybody special.

So far, besides my towels, she has a little silver comb, a bar of honeysuckle soap, and a lacy collar she's going to sew on to her best dress for her wedding. She's also been sewing herself a nice warm coat for up north. She'll bring along a pan and spoons and her daddy's old hunting knife.

The coat she's making is made of a couple of dozen rabbits. I hate to see all those white jacks gone to make a coat she'll never need. Course she can always change it into a blanket. Even here in the south, the nights are cold.

Well, if pretending to get married makes her happy for a while, why not? She has little enough to enjoy. A pretend life is better than nothing, but we wonder how she'll be, come April tenth.

Later when I tried to give her another wedding present—a real one this time, a little bone spoon—she said she had enough things by now. We all wonder, is she ashamed to take more presents when she knows the bridegroom doesn't exist? That was a small spoon and had a little snail carved into the end. I liked it myself and, since I was ashamed about giving the old towels, I wanted to make up for that with something really nice. And it isn't as if it would take up much space on the way north.

Next thing we know, she's hung up a picture in her front room. I can't believe it. We've no idea where she got it. A deeply lined face and just the right amount of grey at the temples for somebody her age. (And my age, too.) Black eyes. In the picture, they seem to look deep into you. As she said, not handsome, but he has his own attractiveness. Very masculine. I can see why she picked this picture. I could go for a man like this myself.

He seems pretty well dressed compared to us. Why would somebody like that want anybody from around here? How did they get to know each other in the first place?

But . . . I don't know . . . it makes me want a picture on my wall, too, except where would I find one as good as hers? Or even not that good?

She says his name is Danilo. Now where'd she find that out? And when? Made it up, is what she did.

She does spend her free time alone in the woods, but I do, too, and I never run into anybody out there but us.

I watch her out my back room window. Lately I've followed her several times as she went out walking. She sits and hums to herself. Bees and hummingbirds fly around her as if she's a flower and even when she's not wearing red or yellow. There's a jay that comes and hops around her feet and she feeds him crumbs. That's all that happens. Once a streak of sunlight shined down sideways through the trees on to her tangled white hair and made it glow in a magical way. Not for long, though.

Sometimes I get to thinking Danilo is real and I wonder what he'll think of those frayed old towels I gave. How will he judge me? And all of us weavers and cheese makers? Our mushroom-drying roofs? Our mulberry wine?

People seldom come here except by mistake. We're off the beaten path. We're quaint. The people who run across us say how unspoiled we are. I think if you're ignorant, then you're spoiled. But, like everybody always is, we're ignorant of our ignorance.

rance, you could say. This is the only life we know. I wouldn't fault anybody for wanting to get out of here. We just don't know how.

The business is owned by men who live in town. People say they grow fat on us. We hardly ever see them. I ask Lewella, "Is it one of those men?"

"Oh for Heaven's sake, of course not. How could you think such a thing?"

She's right to be insulted. Nobody would want one of our bosses even as an imaginary husband. Or, rather, *especially* never as an imaginary husband.

She talks to herself even more now than she used to do. I suppose it's him she's imagining beside her. I'm wondering what that's like, so I start mumbling to myself and think of Danilo beside me—ugly but *so* manly. In my daydream he needs a shave. I have him name the birds, the flowers. . . . He would know them better than I do. He would explain why the owl can fly so silently. He'd tell me about the splints of a horse's leg. How the roadrunner has a foot with two toes in front and two in back like a parrot's. . . .

But Lewella doesn't wait till April comes around. I suppose she hasn't even fooled herself and she's ashamed. She gathers up her wedding presents into a big plastic bag and leaves in the middle of the night, as if to avoid all of us, and so as not to have to say goodbye.

I saw her gathering up her greens the night before. She didn't pack up Danilo's portrait. Too bulky I suppose. I had the thought I'd go steal it after she'd gone, but then I thought maybe I'd better pack up, too, and follow. See if she gets any farther than the first village. Besides, she needs looking after. She's as innocent as a six-year-old. I may not be much better myself, but I might be able to keep her out of trouble.

I wrap up in my big black shawl and follow. Off we go. Is this north? I don't think so.

She carries this little beaded purse on a long handle hung over her elbow. The rest of her stuff is in that plastic garbage bag hung over her shoulder. She carries another smaller plastic bag with her food. Everything I bring, food and all, is in my little backpack.

She doesn't hesitate at the village. Goes right on by, as if she knows where she's going.

I'll keep following and when she's all worn out and has eaten all her greens (For sure she took a ball of cheese. I will, too.), I'll confront her and bring her safely home.

She stops to eat greens and cheese when the sun is high. I stop, too, and eat some of mine. Then off she goes. This is still west, not north.

Seems as if she thinks she sees him all over the place. A farmer on a tractor looks like him. She runs off into the field to check. The zucchini seller at the roadside stand looks like him. She stares under his big farmer's hat. There's a group of people having a picnic in a farmyard. She must be thinking one of them might be him. She rushes in. . . . But he's not there. They give her a big slice of watermelon. It's a hot day. Makes me wish I had some, too, but I'm not the kind of person, goes rushing off into other people's parties.

I'm so embarrassed for her.

This is how the day goes.

Her big coat comes in handy that night. I wish I had one like it. I'm tempted to admit I followed and crawl in with her. I'm well back, though hidden in the same copse she chose. Earlier we had passed an orchard and we both stole apples.

The next day is exactly the same. Very embarrassing. I'm glad I'm pretending I'm not with her.

That night we sleep (separately) hidden in a cornfield and eat some of the corn even though it's the kind for the cows and is tough.

Good I'm keeping an eye on her. She'll talk to anybody. I'm worried she'll make somebody angry or that somebody will steal her coat. It's the only thing she has that's of any value. That is, unless she has her lace collar with her. She probably does since she wants it for her wedding.

Then there's a whole day with nothing but wheat and alfalfa fields. Things are getting farther apart and emptier. We have to sleep in a wheat field.

She finally does turn north. That's when I decide to catch up to her. I don't want to spend another night freezing.

She doesn't seem surprised to see me. Did she know all the time I was right behind her?

First thing I say is, "There's no such person as Danilo and you know it."

"There's his picture to prove it."

"That's not even a real name."

"Yes it is. I looked it up."

"Come on home."

"But maybe over the next hill. Who knows who'll be there?"

"More wheat, is what. And look around you. There aren't any hills anymore."

I tell her she's crazy, but she doesn't even care if she is or not. I say it's dangerous out here.

I grab her wrist and try to pull her back. We struggle. I lose. She helps me up and out of the ditch. She says, "You're the dangerous one."

Well at least I get to spend the night under her big coat with her, warm for the first time since we started. I'm so tired even her humming herself to sleep doesn't bother me.

Next day I still lag way behind on purpose—I can't stop her from peering at men, close up under their hats. (She likes big black cowboy hats the best. I guess she thinks that's what Danilo would wear.) I'm worried she'll peer under one too many and I'll have to rescue her.

She's limping even more than ever. Seems as if both her legs are hurting now. (Did I do that to her when we fought? But I'm the one with bruises and pinch marks.) I keep saying we should go back before she gets so she can't walk at all, but she won't stop.

Between us we have enough money to take the bus home—over sixty dollars, most of it mine. Though if we get too far away it won't be enough. The bus goes right to our village. We'd have to walk the rest of the way . . . to our "quaint" nowhere. She says we have to save the money for emergencies. I tell her the way she's hobbling along it's an emergency right now, but she finds two stout sticks for canes and keeps going.

The next morning she decides to wear her lacy collar. She pins it on her pink T-shirt. She does look quite fancy, long as you don't notice the safety pins and those two dead sticks she's using for canes. The collar is really quite nice. It's tan and gold with a design of vines and leaves and gnarled trees, all almost the same color, just a little more goldish than the rest, but I doubt if wearing it is going to help us find Danilo.

Then she sees somebody who looks—to her anyway—like Danilo. "It's him!" she says. Yells, that is.

"How can you think that? He's too short and doesn't even have black hair. I wish you'd brought the picture. With that, I could prove it's not him in half a second."

"What are you saying? It's just like the picture. Cute and chubby."

How can she think that? I ask this man what his name is, but Lewella is already calling him Danilo, so of course he says Danilo.

I say, "You know there's no such name."

How can she think it's him? He badly needs a shower (but of course we do, too). Is it just that he has a big black hat?

He asks her how come she's wearing that beautiful lace collar. "What's the occasion?"

"You," she says. "I knew you were coming."

Oh, for Heaven's sake.

This Danilo is no taller than she is and has a kind of pale, pasty look that's nothing like the picture. He's chubby. I'm wondering, is she going blind?

We keep walking. He follows. He says, "How about that sunset, huh?"

That doesn't sound anything like the man who would have told me why the owls can fly so silently.

Though he pretends not to, he follows us as we look for a sleeping place. I see him watching from behind trees as we settle in. This is a nice little park with a stream and picnic tables. We go to the far end where it's woodsy and hide in the bushes. Lewella takes off the collar and spreads it out on her bags so it won't get wrinkled.

After we're settled in, I sneak back and see that man crawl under one of the tables way at the front of the park. I don't trust him so I try to stay awake to guard us, but I fall asleep sitting up leaning into the bushes. I guess I sleep even harder than usual because of trying to stay awake. Of course everything we had of any value is gone except her coat . . . That lace collar gone, and our sixty-six dollars.

"I told you and told you it was dangerous out here. He could have murdered us for your coat."

I want to blame her for thinking he was Danilo and for wearing that lacy collar, but she's about to cry.

"I'll bet he's already got it all wrinkled. Now what'll I wear to be married in?"

"We'll find another one."

"Not as nice."

"Probably not, but *you'll* be just as nice as ever."

That makes her feel a little better.

"Next time let *me* say if it's Danilo or not."

Now that we've lost the bus fare, I wish we'd turn around while she can still walk at all. I try to fool her with the wrong direction, but she seems to know exactly which way she wants to go.

I'm still lagging way behind. When we get together that evening in order to find a place to sleep, she suddenly appears with a . . . what looks like . . . a diamond ring and I know she hasn't been near to any K Mart or Wal-Mart that I could see. Besides, we don't have a cent. I don't ask. I refuse to pay attention to it even though she keeps waving her hand in front of me. Has she taken to stealing? Well, the next minute we do steal. Corn on the cob out of a back yard garden. This time it's tender and good even though raw.

We're getting thin and we're always hungry. Well, I am. Lewella looks just about as usual, though she's limping more than ever. "Why don't we just go back and wait for April tenth to come along? Please."

Later that evening we come to a little town and find a nice big park. Unfortunately it's across from a bar and there's a drunk sitting on a bench near the baseball diamond. He's wearing exactly the kind of hat Lewella keeps looking under all the time. The way he's sitting his face is easy to see. His hat is tipped way back. He's unshaven. But. . . .

I hurry us past so she won't notice, though she might not recognize him anyway, since before, she picked that funny pasty, short man. Besides, she keeps looking at her ring.

This man is thin and tall. Sitting, legs wide apart, leaning back, asleep or just too drunk. You'd think he'd be hurting his neck that way though maybe the hat helps soften the bench edge. I can smell the alcohol from the path. He's snoring, his mouth is open, his teeth are crooked, he has a lump at the bridge of his nose. . . . But. . . . I can't help it. . . . I find him as attractive as I did his picture.

It's a big park. I take us way to the back, where there aren't any benches or paths. I settle us behind a row of bushes just out of reach of the sprinkler system. I know that'll be turned on at night. It'll be easy to get a drink.

Lewella can't help talking about the ring. "Isn't it nice? Look."

I don't.

"He knew how bad I felt about losing that collar so he wanted me to feel better. At first we'd decided we weren't going to have an engagement ring, you know."

I tell her I'm not going to say a single word. I turn my back and get ready to sleep. . . . or seem to sleep.

Here he sits only a block away. . . . snoring. . . . snorting. . . .

But he exists! I'm all atremble.

After Lewella is asleep, I get up and go back to that bench. He's still in exactly the same position though it's been quite some time. I say, "Dan?" and, "Danilo?" a couple of times, but he doesn't wake up. I sit on the edge of the bench and examine him. A lined face just like the picture. And eyes with dark circles under them. The mustache a little longer than in the picture and there's more grey at his temples. The silky black shirt looks expensive. The vest is gold and tan with all kinds of curlicues. It reminds me of that fancy collar Lewella had. Same curling vine-like designs and gnarled trees. Since it's getting cold, I think to reach over and button it for him, but he's too smelly from drink and what if he woke up with a jump when I touched him? And the more I look, the more I'm glad he didn't wake up when I said Danilo. I've had this chance to study him.

I like his looks so much I hate to go back to Lewella, but I need to crawl under that coat of hers and warm up.

We wake to the smell of coffee. Instead of being stolen from, here's a meal, two hamburgers and two cups of coffee all still nice and hot. We haven't had coffee for a long time. How did somebody do that, and so we woke up just at the right moment?

I don't take a sip or say a word. I rush out to that bench, but he's gone. Of course he is. Why didn't I stay there and wait for him to wake up?

I go back to where Lewella is enjoying her coffee. "See," she says, "He's real enough to bring us breakfast."

I don't answer. I feel glum. Did he give her that ring? Why did he have to get so drunk?

She hobbles off much faster than usual. I suppose the coffee did it. This time it really is north. She walks on, humming to herself even louder than she usually does. (It never has a real tune to it.) I lag farther behind than usual. I'm glad she never saw him. But she was so wrong before, she might not have recognized him anyway.

But I have no business falling in love with her man. Not to mention falling in love with a drunk.

Except a drunk who brought us coffee? Was it him?

Maybe that diamond ring is really real.

I'd have another fight with her about leaving this park and Danilo if I wasn't sure she'd win. How can she, when she's so much smaller than I am? She knows exactly where to pinch and squeeze and how to trip up a person. Where did she learn all those tricks?

We've hardly gone but an hour when—I can't believe it—here's another little chub—by man with a big black hat and Lewella is heading right to him with that eager look of hers.

For Heaven's sake, not again.

I shout. "Let him tell you his name first," but she's already yelling, "Danilo."

"Remember what happened last time? Your lacy collar?"

Except for the hat, he's all in tan-on-tan camouflage. As she nears him I can see he is not any taller than she is.

He's so busy looking at the sky, where, way, way off, there's a flock of geese flying south, that she has to tap him on the shoulder before he notices her yelling at him. Then he points and says, "Look! Look! Look!"

And we all do.

This man, unlike the other one that turned out to be a robber, has a very nice little V-shaped smile. At least that.

I back away even farther. Best not to let him see I'm with her. Though I suppose he knows it already.

I can't understand how she can think this little man is Danilo.

He has one of those scooters. Also painted in camouflage tans. I don't see how two people can get on that and with all her packages, but they do. Good they're both small.

I yell, "Wait!" I rush forward, but I'm too far away.

And there she goes—putt, putt, putt, and lots of smoke—without a second thought about me. But I'd do the same. And anyway, I was pretending not to be with her, why would she say goodbye?

I wave, but she doesn't notice.

Something about that tan scooter and his tan camouflage and all that smelly smoke . . . I don't know what . . . but they disappear before they get to the corner.

She left her two stick-canes as if she will be magically cured of her leg problems. I wonder if she will.

She probably would have done a lot better without me following her around. Her innocence would have saved her . . . those blue eyes . . . that luminous quality . . .

And she went off with her white coat of jack rabbit fur. Who ever heard of that until she made one? It was getting dirty, though. And she took those worn out towels that I'm sorry I ever gave to her. I hope they come in handy sometime, at least as rags.

I hope he's not a drunkard like the other Danilo.

So here I am, no money, no diamond ring, no lacy collar, and even no rabbit fur coat to keep me warm at night. And I'll bet whoever gave us coffee and sandwiches isn't going to do that just for me. She's the one with hair like a little white cloud and a magic innocence that calls down hummingbirds. I'm just as innocent and ignorant as she is, but I don't expect to get any diamond rings.

I look up at the sky where the geese were flying south, only now there's nothing there except one little puffy cloud that reminds me of her.

I watch the cloud for a while and then I head back to that town where *my* Danilo is. I check that bench, but it's too soon for anybody to be drunk and collapsed there, so I head to the far end of the park, back where we spent the night. I miss Lewella, not only for her coat. I even miss that cheerful tuneless humming.

I'm not only cold but hungry and I hardly slept at all last night. I curl up in my shawl and try to sleep before it gets really cold. I push leaves up around me though I don't suppose that helps much. Later I'll see if . . . *he* . . . might be out on that bench.

The moon is high and almost full. This time he's turned sideways, curled up, long legs almost at his chin, and with his cheek against the hard edge of the bench. Again,

his rumpled big black hat is saving his cheek a bit. It's cool so he's all buttoned up. He smells of alcohol again. I sit down at his feet and right under the bench, there's a crumpled up twenty dollar bill. It could have just fallen out of his pocket or it could be for me.

I don't take it.

I look at what long fingers he has. I look at the bump on the bridge of his nose.

I wait. After a while he turns from his left cheek on the back of the bench to his right cheek on the back of the bench. As he turns he gives a big snort.

I wait.

And even though it's cold, I fall asleep.

When I wake it's already morning and he's gone. But the twenty dollar bill is still there.

Just as I reach for it, a boy runs by and scoops it up.

I sit on the bench and think.

So what about him sleeping on a bench? Doesn't he have a home? Will he whisk me off to a life of sleeping on benches? Not that he wants to whisk me off anywhere. Would I agree to that? Yes, I might, and there I was criticizing Lewella for her odd little man.

Would I get to go off in a cloud of smelly smoke to some magical tan on tan place like she did?

Then I think about coffee and eggs. I search in my pockets to see if there might be any coins I hadn't noticed but there aren't any. Maybe if I go where the food is.

I check up and down the street, but there doesn't seem to be any place nearby except that bar. It's closed now.

I go on farther down the road and find a gas station with food. I go on farther to farm houses with gardens and fruit trees. I sneak around and steal. Zucchini doesn't taste that good raw but they have a lot. I don't think they'll miss one. And they have grapevines along their roadside fence.

But nothing is the same without Lewella to look after and to share with. Though it's a lot easier to steal without her hobbling beside me, not paying attention, and singing. I think people noticed every time and just let her steal. I'll bet they won't let me if they see me.

I spend the day more or less in a ditch. Well . . . in a ditch. I feel better after I eat and I'm warm in the sun so I have a really good sleep all afternoon. Wouldn't it be nice if another coffee appeared just as I wake up? But naturally, none does. I steal another zucchini and walk back to town. It's getting dark. I'll go to the bar myself.

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As I near I hear music. An out of tune piano. It sounds cheerful. No wonder people go to bars.

I'm getting awfully grungy. Like that white rabbit fur coat, I'm grimy all over. Leaves and sticks in my hair. I haven't washed it or myself since we left. It's getting to be fall. Pretty soon it'll be too cold to wash even if I find a nice secluded pond.

I try to make sure all the dirt and sticks are out of my hair. I've been using Lewella's silver comb and it's gone off with her. I have to use my fingers.

I've never been in a bar before. I hope I'm not too dirty. Aren't bars usually kind of dark inside?

Somebody is playing rills and trills and arpeggios all around the melody and people are singing, Pack up all your cares and woes, bye, bye blackbird.

I go in. It's a small narrow bar, but seems to go way, way back. I can't see how far. In front there's hardly room for the piano and five or so little tables.

It's decorated as if we're in a forest. In the back it seems to open out. Even looks like the moon is just coming up, way back there behind the trees. As if it really is a forest and as if there's no end to it. It's full of magic lights as if people with flash-lights are way back there in the trees. I wouldn't dare go there.

There's a crowd standing around the piano but I can see there's even a long green vine winding up and around the side of it. There's a big black hat on top and beside the hat a glass of light liquid. They're playing "Whispering Grass . . . Don't Tell the Trees." That seems appropriate.

At first I can't see who's playing, but I see black silky shirtsleeves and a gold and tan vest, glistening even in the dim light. I move to the back of those standing close. He looks serious, businesslike, but there are so many extra notes and flourishes, it's as if it's all a joke.

I don't know what to do. I move away and sit near the door and listen and look around. Now he's playing "Has Anybody Seen my Gal?" *Five foot two. Eyes of blue. . . .* That sounds just like Lewella.

Now that my eyes are more adjusted to the dim light, I think I see her. I'm not sure, but is that her and her Danilo way, way back there under a tree at a little table with a flickering light? Both wearing tan on tan camouflage? I'm pretty sure it's her because of that mess of white hair. I'm even more sure when I see that diamond ring catch the light and flash a beam out towards the front of the bar. It's a real diamond all right. A phony one couldn't do that.

And then this Danilo stops playing and swings around on the stool so he's facing all of us, then takes a big drink from that glass. He's sweating all over his black silk shirt.

Do I dare?

I dare. I join those standing close around the piano.

Right away he looks straight at me and smiles. (And his eyes are just like in the picture, they seem to look right through you. And even so, are welcoming.)

He says hello, just to me. He reaches and plucks something from my hair.

"You have Bindweed in your hair."

This is my Danilo, the one who knows all about nature.

"I'm a mess."

He reaches again and picks more of it out. "Did you know the other name for Bindweed is Morning Glory? Is that what you are?"

"I'm too tired to be Morning Glory. And I haven't washed in days."

"You smell of fresh hay. And of the earth. Jenny? You're Jenny, aren't you?"

"My name is Mary Ellen. But you're Danilo."

"My name is Jack." O



Elven Alvin

Amid the cheering crowds at Cinderella's coach
you spot him lurking, grin too wide by half
and ears a-wiggle. Then, when everybody
seems distracted by the romance, dreams and glory,
up he sneaks to the coach and four,
and on that transformed pumpkin scribbles
foul, rebellious phrases. Alvin the Artiste.

He scrawls graffiti most disturbing
to the magic population—"Robots rule."
"9 to 5 forever." "Do it in a cubicle."

His folks don't understand; he's from the best
of elven families, lives in Avalon eternal,
yet he spurns their greatest rituals,
their ancient, honored customs. Why, he drinks
his wine straight from the box . . . it's blasphemy!
They fail to grasp his punk ambitions;
other elven on the Wild Hunt sport such mohawks, true,

but not dyed pink, and not with styling neck tattoos.
(He won't admit how loud he squealed when getting them.)
So on he goes decaying, proudly growing worse and worse:

inhaling flavored cigs, t.p.ing sacred oaks,
discarding beer cans in the Faerie Circle,
giggling and honking that weird laugh,
a boy of staunch dislikes who's rarely seen
and never caught. His garbage shows up
hither and yon, but when he's on the prowl
you'll see no more than just that crazy grin,

a flash of pixie paint, and off he's gone,
befuddling the Eldars with his scornful,
closing tag: "I'd rather be surfing."

—P M F Johnson

SHADOW ANGEL

Erick Melton

In eighth grade, Erick Melton read every science fiction book from A to Z in his school library. By the time he graduated high school, he knew that he wanted to be an SF writer. Erick spent fifteen years as an actor studying characters and motivation, but now works as a project manager at a legal services company. The author's work has appeared in *Aboriginal SF* and his comic, *SoftMetal*, was recently published by Angry Viking Press. The idea for his first *Asimov's* story came from a misheard request for work to be done before it was given to him. "A moment later I'd spun that into, 'I want you to take me to Broombridge before this gets sent to me.' I had no idea what 'this' was or where 'Broombridge' was located, but I wanted to find out." Erick is now working on a novel that shares the "Shadow Angel" universe.

"I need you to take me to Broombridge, Emil. . . . Before this gets sent to me."

Emil shook his head. "You're diving a starship," he told himself. "Focus on the Actual." "You've been studying me. . . ."

Emil closed his eyes and opened them wide. The Actual blazed with the light of a million traffic signals, each one pointing in a different direction in space and time.

"I want to make use of your talent."

"You've been flirting with me?"

"I guess I'm not that good at it."

"Nav to Pilot. Coming up on Plot Turn 3."

"How long have I been at this?" Emil pushed the thought aside. He was diving a starship through sponge-space. Focus on the Actual. Forget the dive-dreams, the random memories that jumped from his attention like sparks from flint striking steel.

"I see you before we meet."

"Good-bye, Haneul."

"Nav to Pilot. Coming up on Plot Turn 3. Please acknowledge."

"Shadows . . ."

"Plot Turn 3. Acknowledged." That was his voice, slipping through his lips of its own accord. Recognizing Haneul's voice, his "Angel's" voice, brought Emil's focus

back on to the "Doing." His fingers twitched inside his control gloves. Thousands of megawatts of energy leapt from the ship's masts to the Higgs sails. They struck the inner surface of the surrounding engineered hypersphere, stabilizing it.

"I think I have found a way to follow the Tau...."

"Plot Turn 3.... Now!"

"Acknowledged. Engaging Plot Turn 3." Emil's fingers formed claws inside the control gloves. He pulled toward him. Talons of energy raked the surface of the hypersphere, distending it, pulling it and the mini-universe Emil had created into a different direction.

"Trapped in Shadows."

Emil shook his head. A bead of sweat broke free from his skin. In the zero-gee of the dive chamber, it floated into his eye. The point-like properties of the Actual became wave-like through the prism of his effort's sweat.

"How long have I been doing this?" Emil asked himself.

"You are trapped in Shadows."

"Tensor fields are increasing." A man's voice, panic and anger fighting for control. *"It's not working."*

"We choose you, Emil. Just as we choose others...."

Emil looked to his right. There was no one there. In the confines of the dive chamber there was no room for anyone but himself. Then, who—?

"Emil!" His Angel's voice. *"The sphere is destabilizing!"*

"Acknowledged." Emil flicked his fingers from his palm, one, two, three. Three bursts from the Higgs sails kept the hypersphere from collapsing. *"Abandoning plot."* He clenched his fist, then slowly opened it. The hypersphere peeled back. The ship regained its mass and rejoined the universe.

"It's the same place." The man's voice again. Emil could hear disappointment and satisfaction in equal measure. *"I tell you, this isn't working...."*

"John, please..." his Angel replied.

"You have to reach back, Emil." The voice came from his right. It sounded like Haneul, his Angel's voice. *"You are the future. The future must reach back to change the past so it can be."*

Emil started to turn his head to find whoever was talking. Before he could, he felt himself fall back inside himself. . . .

"I need you to take me to Broombridge, Emil." Haneul extended her hand across the surface of the table toward him. When she opened it, Emil could see a Tauian data-stick floating above the surface of her palm. *"Before this gets sent to me."*

Emil looked around. Hadn't he just been . . . ? No . . . No, no. He had left the dive chamber hours ago, after checking out of his last berth. He was on Han Nu Wo station now. In the Dive Pilots' Association lounge. It was a few hours before dawn by the station's clock. It was just the three of them in the darkened lounge . . .

"Shadows."

Three? Emil looked to his right. No one was there. Then whose voice . . . ? Where . . . ?

"Rough transit?"

Emil closed his eyes and pinched the bridge of his nose. He shook his head automatically to his ex-wife's question.

"Are you okay, Emil? You're having dive-dreams?" He could hear concern in Haneul's voice. He hadn't expected to hear it again. Neither his ex-wife's voice nor concern for him.

"It not that." Emil shook his head and opened his eyes. He remembered where he was now and why. Seeing Haneul sitting there, long dark hair like rivers of midnight, perfectly oval face, large almond eyes, brought it back. After he de-berthed

from his last ride he'd logged into the local message board. He'd been looking for job prospects but found a message from "Baek-Bachev, Haneul" instead. He was startled that she was trying to reach him. Startled that she was still using his name.

He had made himself wait. He told himself to respond in his own good time. And he had waited. Waited the entire six and a half minutes it had taken to get from the docking spines to the lounge before sending his reply. And then he'd waited the thirty-three minutes it had taken her to get here.

"You don't want to help me?" Haneul's face took on that cross, suspicious look it got when she wanted something but couldn't get it.

"No. Not that, Angel. It . . ." Emil paused, frustrated. His English and Mandarin were functional. Enough to do his job as a dive-pilot. His Korean had gotten rusty since the divorce. Haneul had never learned more than a few phrases of his native Romanian, though it did sound like her English had improved tremendously. He didn't have the vocabulary to lie to her, nor did he have the will to say, "I want you back," in any of the languages he knew.

"What this about?" Emil pointed at the data-stick, changing tack. Despite the simulated gravity from the module's rotation, it floated above the surface of her hand. Making these combination data-storage and networking computers had been one of the few miracles mankind had recreated in the three centuries since the Tau had departed. It was one of the reasons the humans that left Earth still followed them, Emil supposed. That, and to find out what happened to "The Chosen." "What this thing you want to get to Broombridge for?"

Haneul leaned forward over the small lounge table. There was an eagerness in her eyes. A sort of lust. Haneul was passionate about anything she desired. The front of her ship-suit fell open. Emil caught a glimpse of the beautiful cleavage and the . . .

"Shadow."

. . . Wonders he knew were farther below. Had he been reduced to stealing peeks at his ex-wife's tits? A sad depression settled into his chest. He felt the same way when he visited Earth. Twelve billion disciples huddled together believing they had been forsaken. At least they kept the place clean.

"I think I found a way to follow the Tau, Emil." The husky whisper in Haneul's voice was more in keeping with the bedroom than a conspiratorial meeting in a darkened lounge. "I need you to help me keep it. . . ."

There was a loud crack. So loud it shattered the lounge, Haneul, everything into pieces. Emil's head was twisted to the right. His eyes were blinking rapidly. They were watering up.

"Pain," Emil thought to himself. "I'm feeling pain." It gave him enough focus to realize he was in a dive-chamber. The scene in the lounge with Haneul had been a recent memory replayed as a dive-dream. What happened to his helmet?

Something hard and round was shoved into his chest. A hand appeared under his chin. It grabbed the collar of his flight suit and jerked him forward. The restraints biting into his shoulders kept him from being pulled free of the chamber.

"I said, 'Can you hear me, Bachev?'"

A man's voice. An educated British accent. The person who just hit me! With that thought, Emil used his left forearm to knock the hand away. He clutched his helmet in his right to keep it from falling.

"What are you trying to do? Destroy my ship?"

Emil closed his eyes hard and opened them. A face was there. Square cut Asian features. A military styled flat-top cut to within a millimeter's tolerance.

"He has Haneul. Your Angel."

Emil's eyes narrowed. He didn't know if that was his voice or someone else's, but he trusted it.

"What is it, Bachev?" The cultured English voice belonged to the face in front of him. Incongruous, but for some reason not surprising. "Do you know something? Is that why you are staring at me with those hard eyes? Hmm? Do you remember where you are?"

A name came into Emil's head. Not the man's name. Part of the answer, though which part Emil didn't yet know.

"Chaoyang Hao." The man's eyes narrowed with Emil's reply. What did it mean, though? Emil felt his mind start to drift. . . .

A sudden "whoof" snapped Emil's attention back. The dive chamber had been sealed. The face was gone. Emil searched all around him. His helmet was back on. He was alone, trapped in . . .

"Shadows."

"Get the ship ready to try again, John." Then, to someone out of reach of her mic. "He is strong. And he has a great affinity for this transit. If anyone can stabilize it into a wormhole . . ."

"You need to reach back into the past so the future can be."

Two voices. One from his helmet. One from somewhere to his right. Both sounded like his Angel, Haneul. But who were they talking about, trying to stabilize . . .?

The actual display ignited. Years of training and experience snapped Emil's focus to the task at hand. Like some ancient god, Emil reached forward to grab a new universe and breathe life into it.

The representation of the Hawking radiation on the inner surface of the hypersphere glittered in the actual. The virtual particles were trapped. . . .

"In shadow."

. . . Inside the hypersphere when it was engineered. Entangled with their virtual partner outside the sphere, dive-pilots used them to guide themselves through sponge-space. Emil forced himself to concentrate on the Actual. He was "Doing Mode" now.

"Plot Initiated. First Turn in thirty seconds. . . . Mark."

"Acknowledged." The word pushed its way past Emil's lips on its own. Even such tiny exchanges distracted from the "Doing." They struck his consciousness like flint on steel, creating sparks of thought that were just out of reach. Like the particles fighting to escape the hypersphere that would annihilate themselves if they succeeded.

"Trapped in shadow."

"Plot Turn One. . . . now."

Emil clenched his left hand and "pulled." The fingers of his right hand made three fast twitches. The energy released through the Higgs sails distended the hypersphere in the direction of Haneul's plot. The lights of the Actual, the ship, everyone inside, the tiny universe Emil had created followed.

"Is it working?"

Emil shook his head. Concentrate, he told himself. There was a whiff of betrayal in the puff left by that spark.

"On approach to Plot Point Two." His mouth took care of talking while his mind fixed itself to the Actual. There was something wrong. He continued to manipulate the flaring points of imaginary matter to make them real, but something wasn't right. It was a distant thing, like the feeling of breathing or the awareness of your pulse in your throat.

"Trapped."

"Trapped where, Angel?"

"Nav to Pilot, repeat your last communication?"

"I am trapped."

"Who. . . ?" Once more, Emil felt the presence of someone not there to his right.

"Plot Point Four. . . . now!"

"Plot Point Four? What of Two and Three?" Before he could find out where he'd

been, Emil grabbed and pulled back hard, pulling the hypersphere along its temporal axis, back upon itself.

"Merger!" The man's voice was frayed with excitement.

The hypersphere's length had doubled. A ship-like thing made from the pixilation of the trapped particles was there. It would have substance if Emil chose to acknowledge it.

"Exceeding tensor limit." Emil tapped his fingers to stabilize the hypersphere with sharp little pokes. The hypersphere was collapsing. The other ship vanished. Emil opened his hands and spread them wide. A burst of energy rebounded against the inner surface of the sphere, pushing it back. The ship was shuddering like a wounded beast. "Emergency transition now!"

"It's the same place!" Anger and threat could be heard in the man's voice.

"Trapped."

Free from the Actual, Emil relaxed. One of the puffs left by the sparks floated in his consciousness long enough for him to catch a whiff of something.

"You're using me." The words left Emil's mouth like smoke from an extinguished candle.

"Nav to Pilot, please repeat?"

Emil was already falling back into himself. His mind, more nimbly than the hypersphere, went back in time. . . .

"You're using me, aren't you?" The thought roused Emil from the slumber he was falling into. He could feel her body lying against his. His arm made a perfect transit past the event horizon of her dark hair, curving under her neck and along her back. Holding her close, his fingers stroked the left cheek of her buttocks.

"I'm in my sleeping coffin," Emil thought with surprise and wonder. He should be elsewhere, shouldn't he? Someplace like . . . the ship's dive chamber?

"Have you ever been to Hwaryeohan Mirae?" she replied, not answering his question directly.

"My jobs never go there." Emil knew of the place, though. A small colony on the Chinese-Two transit. A lost cause now that the Korean People's Republic and the Chinese subsidies that supported it had both expired.

"You only dive to Broombridge, ne?" Haneul began to trap the hairs on his chest between the fingers of her left hand, tugging at them. More than a few of those hairs had started turning gray. In his coffin, with the lights off . . .

"Shadow."

He hoped she wouldn't notice.

"I do good, that transit."

"Very, very good, you do."

"Hmm?" Something in her tone caught his attention. He was still trying to figure her out, this "Angel" that had taken over his life. His nickname for her came from the discovery that "Haneul" meant "Heaven." "I do okay I think, but . . ."

"Your transit time is two-thirds that of other pilots." Haneul shifted her body. She turned her head to look up at him. A sleeping computer screen, the only light in the coffin, created a faint nimbus around her head. It left her face in . . .

"Shadow."

"You did not know that?"

"No. I did not."

"She wants to make use of you."

"You been studying me?" Emil struggled to lift his head. He wanted to get a better look at her. He wanted to turn on the lights and drive back the . . .

"Shadows."

. . . Covering her face. A nagging suspicion had returned. Why had someone so

beautiful and intelligent, and so young, picked him to be with? Had The Chosen back on Earth felt this way when the Tau told them they would be leaving Earth with them?

"I like to know more of the people I care about." There was a teasing, secretive tone in her voice.

"I want to see if you can free me."

The voice sounded like Angel's, but it came from inside his head. Emil's mouth became dry. His heart starting beating hard. Was this moment real? Was he experiencing the most vivid dive-dream of his career after a long transit? The roof of the coffin was less than an arm's length away. If he tried to touch it, would it melt beneath his fingers, revealing the actual display in the midst of a dive? Where was he heading anyway?

"So serious, your face!" Haneul lifted herself and laid her body across his. The incredible softness of her breasts as they flattened against him clouded his thoughts. The tickling of her pubic hairs as they rubbed against his stomach made his questions about reality seem inconsequential. "I need to do something to take you out of your mind."

"That's where all this is happening...."

The other voice became lost in the rising static of his passion. His only focus was bringing as much of himself in contact with her as possible.

"Bachev!"

The coffin vanished. Emil reflexively brought up his arm to block a blow. Instead, someone started shaking him. The restraints sawed at his shoulders with each pull, threatening to cut them off.

"John! Stop it. Now!"

The shaking stopped.

"We came to change the past, but became trapped in shadows."

"Shadows." Emil nodded. "Trapped." There was someone there, something . . . "The shadows, they fool us."

"What are you talking about, Emil?" Haneul's voice. But not his Angel . . . ? He could feel soft hands reaching from a distant light to cup his face.

"He's hallucinating." Emil could hear the disdain in the man's voice. "Tripping," as the Americans say.

"He's making a way for us." Emil could hear Haneul's reply. He listened closely, trying to see if it truly was his "Angel." "Each time he repeats the transit it increases the bias toward wormhole stabilization to the specified pointdate."

"A pointdate literally in the middle of nowhere," the male voice replied. "Buried in sponge—"

"He's making a way for us," the voice that sounded like Haneul's and yet wasn't his "Angel" insisted.

Haneul's face came into focus. Right in front of him and yet light years away. Close and far away. Like the final days of their marriage. Like . . .

"We think you know the way, Emil...."

...That meeting . . .

"That's why we invited you to join us."

Emil scanned his surroundings, the way an animal at a watering hole sensing danger might. He was floating inside the inner hatch to the Command and Control Center of a ship called the *Chaoyang Hao*. Haneul had invited him here after their encounter in the DPA lounge the day before. The *Chaoyang Hao* was a factory ship. A huge factory ship. So big it needed a double berth. It held a fleet of auxiliary vessels to help it chew up asteroids and comets and spit out anything from heavy equipment to the latest shoe designs from Nánmén'ér. In the pantheon of information transport ships, the *Chaoyang Hao* was a Zeus.

"If she has such a ship to call on," Emil asked himself, "then why does she need me?"

"Because she is trapped and doesn't know the way out."

Emil looked to his right. A crewman was there, overseeing an engine refit from his workstation. His back was to Emil. Who had just spoken . . . ?

"Impressive, isn't she?"

Emil looked at the man standing next to Haneul. He had a soft, almost gentle voice with an accent that spoke of higher education at Oxford or Cambridge. The voice was in contrast to the square, angular Asian features and the closely cropped military style hair cut. There was a hardness to the eyes, too. A sharpness to his look with the edge directed toward Emil.

"Emil, this is John Meng Xia Li." Haneul laid her hand on the man's arm. Emil felt himself rankle. "He is the captain of the *Chaoyang Hao*."

"Mr. Bachev, a pleasure." Captain Meng gave Emil a single curt nod. The glitter from his sharpened gaze told Emil that the moment was anything but a pleasure for him.

"Captain." Emil nodded back. He was feeling out of place. Like an intruder despite the invitation. He wanted to get on with it. "Angel and me, we spoke of the Tau in the lounge . . ."

"A moment, if you please." Meng raised his hand. He looked over his shoulder and barked an order to his crew. Emil guessed it was Cantonese since he understood none of it. The crew started securing their stations and leaving.

A plump young woman who had been monitoring local commodity prices did a slow-motion vault over the chair at her station. Meng reached around Haneul's waist and pulled her out of the way.

"Sorry, sorry . . ." The woman bowed her head toward Haneul.

"It's okay. No problem." Haneul waved the woman's concern away. With her other hand she held on to Meng's shoulder as he levered her back into place. Emil noticed how the touch lingered.

"She's definitely sleeping with him," Emil thought.

"Of course. Just as when you had what was wanted most."

Emil looked to his right. He felt his jaw drop. Haneul was there. A different Haneul from the one being held by Meng. A more idealized Haneul, he recognized. Younger, yet more knowing. Harder, yet more lovely. The only thing the same was the suspicious hunger in the eyes.

"This is a dive-dream, isn't it?" Emil asked the floating Haneul. She was dressed in a flight suit identical to the one he wore when diving a ship through sponge-space. "This is all in my head, isn't it?"

"Isn't everything?"

"Mr. Bachev . . .?"

"Hmm?" Emil looked forward again. The crew was now floating past him through the hatch. They were pointedly not looking at him as they exited.

"I asked if you heard the news about the Nánmén'ér transit?" Meng's voice was coated with polite restraint. "Its stabilization into a navigable wormhole. The ramifications for your profession must concern you."

"I not heard. . ." Emil's head jerked left, then right. His English and Mandarin were functional. He could perform a pilot's "Four Takes." Take the ship in, take a meal, take a dump, take the ship out. Meng was clearly more fluent, and Emil was having trouble following him. "Nánmén'ér, you said?"

"The Alpha Centauri transit. It is now a wormhole. You heard?" Meng slowed his speech and raised his voice as if talking to a stupid child.

"No. I not heard." Emil's mouth puckered from the sour feeling he was getting. He did take note of Meng's use of "Alpha Centauri."

"That was a mistake," Emil thought toward the Haneul beside him.

"He's focused on you and not the task," Floating Haneul replied.

"He's trying to make me look stupid on purpose."

"Because he is afraid of where you will lead them." Floating Haneul was starting to feel more real to Emil than the one across the way. Perhaps because she was made up of everything he felt about her.

"Why?" Emil asked out loud.

"Why . . . ? I assumed you would be interested," Meng replied.

"Because he fears that I chose you and not him," Floating Haneul, *Real* Haneul said at the same time.

"Once the transit stabilizes," Meng continued, his eyebrows arching upward in an exaggerated expression of surprise. "The services of a dive-pilot such as yourself will no longer be required."

"I do not dive Nánmén'ér transit." Emil purposefully used the Mandarin name for the star. Naming conventions were politically charged in the age of information transport. The Chinese government was scrupulous in their use of the Mandarin name for the star in question, Nánmén'ér. The Americans and their allies called the same system "Alpha Centauri." Others, trying to remain neutral, would use "Rigel Kentarus" or "Rigel Kent." Emil now thought he could guess where Haneul and her partner Meng had received the funds to back their project.

"Remarkable process, though, isn't it?" Meng carried on with his superior attitude, unaware of the connection he had allowed Emil to make. "The evolution from an engineered hypersphere to a stable wormhole is quite similar to the process within the brain wherein a new thought becomes a permanent memory. Starting from an electrical impulse in the hippocampus to a chemical bridge to . . ."

"This is a discussion for later, John." Haneul's voice carried a subtle warning that Emil could recognize. He wondered if Meng could hear it, too. "We need to get down to business."

The three of them were alone now. The C&C crew had all left. "Yes," Emil said. "We get down to business."

"We want you to dive the *Chaoyang Hao*." Haneul gave Meng a glance. Meng looked like he was physically restraining himself with his arms crossed against his chest. "The data-stick I showed you contains information from what we believe was another factory-ship when our hyperspheres merged. The data was sent directly to quantum storage, preserving its uncertainty, so it shouldn't affect the transit. We want you to attempt a temporally retrograde transit to a spacetime translation pointdate prior to the one stamped on the data-stick."

"Why?"

"That is the job offer, Mr. Bachev. If you don't want . . ." Meng stopped when Haneul rested her hand upon his arm.

"I've made a study of the Broombridge transit . . ." Haneul started to say.

"Something I've been doing since before our marriage," Real Haneul whispered in his mind.

"The structure of sponge-space along that transit route has an unusual topology. Its shape is . . . changed." Haneul looked at Emil expectantly. He nodded. Emil suspected that she switched to simpler English to help him keep up. "The change is consistent. . . . It is the same as the shape of sponge-space along the same transit route the Tauian Mothership used when it left Earth."

"Congratulations." Emil was sincere. Haneul's life was like a rocket launch. Each stage, like her marriage to him, took her farther from the personal gravity well she was trying to escape. If she could provide the American alliance a faster way to reach the sector of space they were trying to carve out for themselves, she could reach escape velocity. If that same transit proved to be a path to the Tau, it would give her desire for escape anti-matter engines. And if she could discover where that enigmatic race had taken "The Chosen," the tens of thousands of people that left with them in the second

half of the twenty-first century . . . ? Her life's transit would make a sponge-space dive feel sluggish in comparison. "When you publish you become very rich."

"I'm . . ." Haneul gave Meng another look. "We're not planning on going public. Not yet."

"I see."

"Do you now?" Meng's chest swelled with tension. His question was a challenge.

"Broombridge lead to Aussie-American transit lines." Emil shrugged as if anyone could read the situation. "Americans pay much to make their space easy to reach. Pay more if it lead to Tau."

"There are long term economic and political implications for what we have found." Haneul gave Meng's arm a squeeze. "We don't want our findings released until we've taken them to the fullest conclusions."

"Someone else know." Emil nodded at Haneul. "Someone . . . *Cum se spune asta?*" He snapped his fingers as he remembered the phrase he wanted. "Beat you to punch, no? You want me to take you before they find out to . . . 'Beat them to punch' back."

"*That's what I want you to think,*" Real Haneul whispered.

Haneul's smile broadened. She seemed genuinely pleased that Emil had caught on. More than pleased. Vindicated. Even though he knew he was being manipulated, Emil couldn't help but feel a sense of pride blossoming in his chest.

"You've always had," Haneul was saying through her smile, "a special relationship with this transit. I want to make use of that talent. . . ."

"Again."

"Again!"

Emil was thrown back. His helmet hit the edge of the headrest, hard. The *Chaoyang Hao C&C* was gone. Haneul was gone. Real Haneul. . . .?

"How many times does this make? Eleven? Twelve? Any sign of stabilization yet?"

Emil pulled his hand from his control glove. He opened his faceplate and rubbed his face. He recognized Meng's voice now. Had he truly made a dozen dives in a row? Once, when young and foolish, he had made three straight dives without a break. He had spent the next seventy-two hours in his bunk locked in dive-dreams. What could bring him to try a dozen?

Because his Angel asked it of him. Haneul had been his own personal Tau. While with him, answering his questions like an oracle, he had felt blessed. And when she left he became like the people who remained on Earth, trying to make up for unknown sins.

"*You must choose your own way,*" Real Haneul's voice came to him. "*You know what must be done to reach us.*"

"Us?"

"He's close. He has to be." Haneul's voice. From "out there." Somewhere beyond what seemed real to him. What did you do when dreams were more real than what was real? "His transit times are a third faster than the best time of our initial attempt."

"But the tensor limits are identical each time. I'm beginning to think there is nothing to transit to."

There was a long pause. Emil opened his eyes, squeezed them tight, then opened them again. He created a bubble for himself. A mental hypersphere of lucidity. Haneul was there, just outside the dive-chamber's hatch. She was holding a data pad toward Meng. The hand holding the pad was slowly retreating. Meng was looking down at her. His expression was hard.

"Are you saying you don't trust my plan anymore?" Haneul said. Then, with her lips not moving, "*You are a liability if I can't control you.*"

"That was before these failed attempts." Meng opened his hands. "*I won't be discarded,*" Emil heard though Meng's lips were still. "Not by you nor whatever is calling to him."

"I can hear what they're thinking," Emil said to himself. "They're inside my head." "Isn't everything?"

Emil found Real Haneul in the dive-chamber beside him. She was in her flight suit. Her face plate was lifted.

"You are stuck," he said to her. "In a shadow cast across real space from some-when else."

"It was our mistake." Real Haneul nodded, her lips not moving. *"Other futures distracted us when we tried to return. We tried to follow several paths at once."*

Return? Then the truth came to him, like a candle in the darkness. "You are my Angel. It is why my transit times are so much faster. I am following you while other pilots follow shadows."

Real Haneul smiled at his understanding. Emil felt blessed.

"It isn't about time." Emil tried to concentrate. Doing so made Real Haneul waver. He gave up, simply letting his understanding be. "Not in the way flesh and blood Haneul thinks it is. It is not about going to a specific point in the past. It's about going to a moment before now. That's where you are, always a moment before now."

"She lied to you." Real Haneul's voice filled with concern. *"She never intended for you to reach Broombridge."*

"I know." Haneul's plot filled Emil's mind. It was a living thing, in the same way Real Haneul was alive. "The plot is made to look like it reaches Broombridge, but the endpoint doesn't extend far enough. It falls within the boundary conditions encompassed by your shadow. *That* is where the problem comes from."

"Futures compete, Emil." Real Haneul was watching him closely. Her eyes were bright with anticipation. *"They reach back to shape the past so they can become. We need you to change your past so you can be the future we need you to be."*

"It's about options." Emil shoved his hands into his control gloves. "And only I can choose."

Haneul and Meng, hearing him from the other side of his universe, turned to look at him.

"What are you mumbling about, Bachev?"

"Emil? Did you say—?"

Emil hooked his thumbs. The hatch slid closed, cutting Haneul off. He spread his fingers wide inside the control gloves. Electromagnetic fields, the Higgs sails, surrounded the ship. The rest of the universe now saw the *Chaoyang Hao* as a macroscopically large massless particle.

"Stop!" Meng pounded on the hatch. "You maniac. . . ."

"Emil, wait! Where . . . ?"

Emil made "trigger hands." He squeezed his forefingers and a grazer beam from the *Chaoyang Hao*'s nose lanced out. It captured a hypersphere and expanded it.

"Engineering! Cut power to the dive-chamber. I don't care—"

"John, it's too late. He's—"

"I'm waiting for you, Emil."

"I'm coming, Angel." He clenched both fists then opened them into a ball, the hypersphere inflated. The *Chaoyang Hao* was enveloped. There was an explosion of Hawking radiation in the Actual. Emil sent thousands of megawatts into the hypersphere's surface with a flick of his fingers to calm the tensors threatening to shred it.

"Power reserves are down to 20 percent!"

"Why didn't you recharge—?"

"There wasn't time! I didn't think your maniac ex-husband would—"

"It's all right." Real Haneul's words caressed his mind like a lover's fingertips. *"It will be enough."*

"What will be enough, Emil?"

"She'll tell me how to get there," Emil replied.

"Who—?"

With fingers made of electric fire Emil grabbed the hypersphere and pulled it around. He pointed it in a direction that didn't exist before he thought of it and let it go.

"*You hear voices. . . .*"

The hypersphere was rippling like a balloon caught in a storm. The tensor fields were the most powerful Emil had encountered.

"Don't you?"

Emil shook his head with a snap. His instinct was to focus on the Actual. Then he remembered what he was about and let his hands relax. Instead of trying to drag the sphere toward him, his hands caressed it into a shape dictated by his dreams.

"Emil! That's not Plot Three. What are you doing?"

"Most dive pilots see things when they dive-dream. Shapes, colors, things like that. But you see and hear people. . . . Voices?"

Emil and Haneul were in a sleeping cabin together. Their honeymoon trip! A short berth diving a ship to Xu Yan where they would spend a week on the station together.

"Yes." Emil shrugged as he had back then. A part of him knew he was in the midst of a dive. Coupled with the joy of having his new young wife snuggled against him, warm and naked, it gave him a thrill like driving blindfolded down a busy highway. "It different from others for me. My record is clean so they let me dive."

"What is it you see? People from the future?" There was a hint of awe in Haneul's voice.

"I see you before we meet." Emil added extra emphasis to it this time. He looked down at the top of her head, expecting her reaction.

"Truly?" Haneul lifted her face to look him in the eyes. Emil willed the truth of what he told her to penetrate her gaze and plant the seed of using him in the future in her thoughts.

The dive-dream faded into the Actual. It had changed. The Actual. The past. Emil could feel it.

"It's why I've been flirting with you during rehearsals."

"You been flirting with me?" Another dive-dream, farther back. He had taken time off to audition for a community play on Broombridge Station. It was where he had met Haneul, also on holiday from school. Acting and writing were his artistic hobbies, unlike the painting or sculpting of most dive-pilots.

"I guess I'm not that good at it." They were backstage. Haneul was dressed as the Samurai's Wife. Emil was wearing the rags of the Bandit from Akutagawa's "The Grove." They were waiting in the wings. . . .

"In the Shadows."

... For the scene on stage to end. Since first meeting her he had been plagued by this feeling that he knew her from somewhere else. Now he knew. It was from the future he knew her. She was lifting her chin, her mouth parting for him. Bolder than before, he bent his head forward to taste her. . . .

"We've got to stop him!"

Emil cried out. Meng's voice, crackling with anger, filled his ears. The tensor fields in the hypersphere were building. Emil flicked his fingers to stabilize them.

"What's wrong with him?"

"Over excitation of the brain's default network," the words marched out of Emil's mouth, good little soldiers on parade. "Caused by over-exposure to the visual stimulation of the representation of Hawking radiation in the Actual display."

"Terrific. He can answer questions from flight training but can't tell us what he's doing now!"

"Emil! We're off plot. We're . . ."

"Going through Shadows."

"It will be fine." Was there something flickering in the Actual? Was he hearing something in the hiss of virtual particles?

"Translate us back to normal space, Emil. Please."

"*The Future.*"

"The future 'what,' Emil?"

"At this rate we'll have no . . ."

Emil cut off the communication link. He increased the volume coming from the Actual. The hiss of the Hawking radiation sliding across the inner surface of the hypersphere was as loud as he could stand it.

"Tell me what I need to know," Emil whispered.

"*And that is?*" The voice of Real Haneul was there in the hiss. Her face forming and reforming in the dancing pattern of the Actual. She was a living stereogram.

"The future. It is the reason I'm faster on this transit. You are casting shadows the other pilots think is real space. I'm looking past those shadows to see the future." Emil could feel his understanding in his head when he didn't think about it. Then, another question, "Are you the Tau?"

The face in the Actual smiled at Emil. He felt the warmth of her approval filling him to the brim. This was what The Chosen felt when they ascended with the Tau from Earth.

"*There are several futures, Emil,*" Real Haneul said. "*Each one is trying to reach back to shape the past so it can be.*"

"Then show me the one where I reach you."

Her face vanished. In its place Emil saw a new direction. He used his control gloves to pull the hypersphere that way.

A flashing message appeared across the top of the Actual. Haneul and Meng were trying to reach him.

"*I need your help, Emil. Take me to Broombridge . . .*"

Like a maestro conducting an orchestra, Emil reshaped that moment. Haneul had come to set him up, to use him for her purposes. Now, Emil allowed her to do so to be put into this position.

Another flashing message more urgent than the first. Emil ignored it.

"*Broombridge control, this is the Īnger requesting . . .*"

Yes! His own ship. He would need a ship to reach her. His hands reached out to caress his ship's control panel. Fans of energy distended the hypersphere toward it. The universe followed.

"*Meng knows . . .*"

He and Haneul talking like conspirators in some empty space in the *Chaoyang Hao*. She was floating closer to him than she had in years.

No. He wanted something different now. Emil's hands cut through that shadow-future like scalpels to get past it.

The Actual blinked. It blacked out again for an instant more. They were trying to shunt power to the back-up dive-chamber.

Emil clenched his hands. A new future appeared, one where the *Chaoyang Hao* would be crumpled to the size of a hydrogen atom. The hypersphere quivered.

The power stabilized. Emil's hands relaxed. Another future reached back to grab his attention.

"*I've come for the engineer's position . . .*"

In the airlock of his own ship, the *Īnger*, she floated there. Petite. Almond eyes. Chestnut hair that shone like bronze. "Yume" would be her name, which meant "Dream."

Emil's fingers reached out to caress the shining strands of bronze. Fire crackled from the Higgs sails. With something like a sigh the hypersphere curled and rolled around him.

Power reserves down to 5 percent. One last touch. One last point. One last vision from the future that was shaping him.

"Good-bye, Haneul. . . ."

Emil's hands started to crush it. He stopped them, forcing them open.

"Good-bye, Haneul." They were in the Broombridge DPA lounge. He was standing. He was about to leave for good. *"Good luck with your venture."*

"That was our mistake," Real Haneul said to him. *"To take hold of one future, you have to let go of another."*

The hypersphere suddenly distended. Merger. Another ship was there. A specter from the past. And Emil was now the future. Emil linked his plot recorder to the flight control system. He extended his fingers toward the other ship. Bolts of fire sprang from the *Chaoyang Hao* toward it, carrying a message to the past to reshape it in his image.

The merged spheres expanded. Power dropped out. Emil's plot recorded a translation into normal space. The Actual said they were still inside an engineered hypersphere.

Before Emil could wonder what it meant, he fell back into a sea of images of things yet to be.

"You're still hallucinating?"

Emil opened his eyes. He shook his head and looked around. They were in the Dive Pilots' Association lounge on Broombridge. It wasn't as nice as the one on Han Nu Wo. More like a cafeteria, really. Rows of tables instead of booths. Buffet-style food service. Banks of bright lights overhead. Emil liked that part of it. The lights driving back the shadows.

"I guess you can say that." Emil let his eyes rest on Haneul. He gave her a thin smile. *"Persistent dive-dreams we call them, yes?"*

"It's been close to three weeks now."

"Has it?" Emil's smile broadened. Haneul actually blushed and averted her eyes. Emil could only remember bits and pieces after his final dive. He knew that he had led them to a perfectly stabilized hypersphere somewhere in sponge-space. It was the *"something"* inside that hypersphere that cast the three dimensional shadows along the Broombridge transit. Each pilot's transit was off as a result, with no two of them the same. It prevented the transit from stabilizing.

No one would tell him what was inside the stable hypersphere. From their reaction, Emil guessed it was something spectacular.

"John is concerned about security," Haneul said as she looked back at him. *"I told him you could be trusted, but . . ."*

"It is okay. Really. I am more bothered by having my plot-recorder wiped." That was a violation. It was a point of honor amongst pilots that you respected each other's plots. *"That plot is mine, no? I did find it."*

"Yes. You truly did." Haneul beamed at him. Emil fought the feeling of accomplishment trying to grow inside him. *"Even with your plot, John is afraid he might not be able to dive us back."*

"I am sure he will be fine. . . ."

"As long as . . ."

"If I get proper compensation."

"Certainly." Haneul leaned forward. The motion caused the front of her shipboard jumpsuit to fall open. Emil's eyes dipped to take in the wonders promised by the shadows there.

"What do you think would be adequate?" she asked through barely parted lips.

"I think . . ."

"Double it."

"...Twenty million would be fine."

Haneul's smile vanished. There was a flash of shock in her eyes, quickly hidden. Emil could feel his own surprise at what he'd done. He'd been rehearsing for the last few days. He had decided to ask for five million, then doubled it to make sure he wasn't low-balling himself. He doubled it again when he heard the suggestion in his mind.

"A bit on the cheap side." The husky tone to Haneul's voice told him she was a bit hurt. She had expected him to ask her to return as part of the price. Emil had seen that future and where it led. "Still planning on being just a dive-pilot?"

"I have plans." Emil kept his smile under control lest Haneul think he was gloating at her expense. He had found a medium sized info-skiff for sale in the local yard. It had oversized Q-batteries and four hamster cages for passengers. Five million would secure a load to buy it. Twenty million would do that and pay for upgrades as well.

"Your skill on the Broombridge transit won't be worth much in the future." There was a challenge in Haneul's voice as she lifted her chin toward him.

"That will be some time, no? Especially if you double-cross Americans and sell to Chinese."

Haneul straightened up. She crossed her arms over her chest, closing off the opening from before. The voice in his head had been right about that too, it seemed.

"One more thing..."

"Also, the data-stick. The one you show me on Han Nu Wo."

Haneul's eyes twitched. "Why?"

"Act like it's nothing."

Emil shrugged. "A memento. It start all this, no? But if you not want to give it up, instead of twenty million..."

"No, no. It's fine." Haneul reached into her pocket and pulled it out. She gave it one last suspicious look, then extended it to Emil.

"Thanks." Emil slipped it into his pocket. "And the money?" Another few moments and that was transferred to him as well.

"People usually celebrate the end of a successful business deal." Haneul was watching him closely, one finger idly twirling a strand of hair. "Perhaps..."

"Sorry. I have something to take care of." Emil made himself get to his feet. He gave her one last smile. "Good luck, Haneul." That was the first time he'd used her real name since they had met. "Good luck with your venture."

"Thank you, Emil." Haneul's smile struggled to match his. "Good luck to you as well."

Emil turned and headed out. He could feel the data-stick in his pocket. It contained the recording of the actual display he beamed to the *Chaoyang Hao* of the past during his last dive. To Haneul it was nothing but static. She had known all along what was on it. Had she thought it anything more, she would have erased it just as she had his plot recorder.

It was getting that message of static from an unknown ship, though, that pushed her to get Meng to accept her plan and contact him. Her plan, from the beginning, was for him to build a stable transit to the "something" they had found, something related to the Tau, and leave him unable to remember how he had gotten there.

"But you don't need the plot, do you?"

Whether it was the Angel of his dreams or the Voice of the Tau, Emil wasn't sure. All he knew was the glorious feeling that he'd been chosen.

"You will hear my voice from within the Actual. I will tell you how to return."

As he stepped from the brightness of the lounge into the darkness outside, Emil felt himself slipping into something like a dive-dream. He gave in to it, allowing shadowy fingers of the future to shape him so it could be. O

THE ODOR OF SANCTITY

Ian Creasey

Ian Creasey lets us know that "the concept of the Olvac in my new story was inspired by the 'sonovac' device in J.G. Ballard's novelette 'The Sound-Sweep.' The Ballard story is currently available in *The Complete Short Stories of J.G. Ballard: Volume 1*." Ian is a big fan of Ballard, and definitely recommends his short fiction. He tells us, "If you'd rather not tackle a huge omnibus edition, Ballard's earlier collection *Vermilion Sands* is a good place to start."

Every day, Dora felt guilty when she arrived at the hospice in the center of Manila. Francesco had forbidden her to come. "Others need you more than I do," he'd said, when he was still able to talk.

She came anyway. Today, as always, she disembarked from the crowded jeepney into the smell of traffic fumes, garbage, fried bananas from the street vendors. Beyond the hospice doors, the city odors disappeared, swallowed by the Olvac filters and replaced by a soothing scent of apples. Dora walked upstairs to Francesco's room, which was small but comfortable. He needed nothing larger, there being no prospect of him ever rising from his bed.

Born in Italy, Francesco had spent decades in the Philippines, his skin becoming almost as brown as Dora's own. Now his withered body and sagging face looked like congealed fat from the bottom of a frying pan. Since the loss of his sight, Francesco's eyes stayed shut most of the time, but Dora could sense his body's tiny signals of wakefulness.

As usual, she began her vigil by reciting a prayer. Sometimes Francesco would cross himself afterward, but he didn't do so today; perhaps he was too weak. After leaving a respectful pause, Dora began talking in a more conversational style. On earlier visits she had already expressed her own gratitude for the mission's schooling, and their support when she went on to study law, an undreamed of luxury for the sixth daughter of a shanty-town family. Now she passed on some of the messages she'd received from friends and neighbors—many people had cause to thank Francesco.

Forty years ago, Father Francesco began teaching classes in arithmetic. He subse-

quently established a school, then later built a clinic and a church and a soup kitchen and a shelter and whatever he felt people most needed. To do all this, he founded an organization called Manna: an acronym that varied from English to Spanish to Tagalog, the precise words being less important than the practical help that the mission delivered. Aside from regular publicity—which he defended as necessary to raise funds—Francesco's only vice was a fondness for card playing. He was never without a pack of cards, whether to play at rummy or pusoy, or to use as a teaching aid for the smallest child who could count the pips on a deuce.

Dora was doubly close to Francesco: her mother had been his housekeeper, and Dora belonged to the last generation of children who saw Francesco teaching and ministering, before ill health and political machinations forced his retirement. Now, six years after he resigned, the people still remembered him with affection, although Manna itself was debilitated after losing its leader. Francesco had been described as the Philippines' own Mother Teresa, and had proved equally difficult to replace.

As Dora relayed to Francesco the latest batch of messages and good wishes, she looked for a smile or other acknowledgement, but none came. She placed her hand on his neck to check his pulse. His skin was warm, and his sightless eyes opened in response to her touch. But when she spoke—even when she asked him to blink if he heard her—he didn't react.

His hearing had failed. The hospice doctor had warned her that as his condition deteriorated, his senses would fade. Dora grimaced, horrified at Francesco's inert presence: his body a decaying shell and his mind helplessly trapped. What a fate, to be blind and deaf in a dying body! How could she comfort him?

Dora said another prayer. Even if Francesco couldn't hear it, Heaven surely would. She prayed to Saint Lorenzo Ruiz, the first Filipino saint recognized by the Church, asking him to comfort Francesco, who was almost beyond earthly aid.

Then other words burst forth, words that could no longer be suppressed. "Father," she said, "you were selfish."

No reaction came from the figure on the bed. "Selfish, selfish, selfish!" cried Dora. "When it all got too much, you quit. You knew we needed you: everyone begged you to come back. And you wouldn't do it. If you couldn't—if your health wasn't up to it—then you should have named a successor. If only you had anointed someone, it would have stopped all the squabbling and feuding . . ."

She paused, shocked at how much anger had come out. It wasn't only directed at Francesco; she was angry with herself for not saying all this much earlier, at a time when he could hear it and act on it. She'd been loyal, thinking that he deserved a quiet retirement—but the longer she'd defended him, the worse things became in his absence.

"And why wouldn't you choose a successor? You said you had to withdraw completely, and not interfere behind the scenes. Maybe that was true, but it looked as if you didn't *want* anyone else to replace you. You were the mission's public face—you were always the man on TV, the man in the papers. . . . It was all you, you, you. It could never be anyone else."

Yet it worked. Dora could imagine Francesco's riposte to her tirade. He would cite his success at raising funds and inspiring followers. He would point to everything that Manna had achieved: all the schools and clinics and houses, all the lives that had been transformed—including Dora's own.

It felt terribly ungrateful to criticize Francesco. Without him, she would never have had an education. Now she was only two years away from qualifying as a lawyer.

Yet with Manna a feeble remnant of itself, rudderless and becalmed, how many of today's children were missing out on the education Dora had received? How many shanty-town dwellers lacked medicine, housing, solace?

Dora did her best, volunteering as much time as she could spare to help people resolve bureaucratic tangles and legal disputes.

"But it's never enough," she said to Francesco's heedless form. "However much I do, it never feels like enough."

Then she wondered whether Francesco himself had thought the same: feeling that no matter how much money he raised and how much good he did, it was never enough. Was that why he'd so tirelessly promoted himself?

The door opened, and a nurse strode briskly into the room. For a moment, Dora feared that someone had overheard her berating Francesco. But it was only time for him to receive sustenance via the feeding tube.

Dora always disliked watching this process, and since Francesco wouldn't notice her absence, she went outside to sit in the hospice's garden while she considered what she could usefully do. Even though Francesco hadn't heard anything she said, she felt guilty for criticizing him. She wanted to somehow apologize and atone.

The garden was small: just a couple of benches either side of a lily-covered pond bordered with bougainvillea. Masses of white jasmine cascaded from a trellis fixed to the hospice wall. Dora inhaled deeply, relishing the scent. On the trellis, two Olvac cones also absorbed the aroma.

Her heart leapt as she saw the Olvacs and realized their possibilities. Although blind and deaf, Francesco might yet retain his sense of smell. Dora reached into the jasmine blossoms, pulled the nearest Olvac from its clamp, and stuffed it into her pocket.

She returned to Francesco's room and waited for the nurse to leave. Then she examined the purloined Olvac. The Olvacs were a luxury of the monied classes; she'd seen them, but had never owned one herself. This was the harvester model: a conical intake fed odors into a storage bulb, which had a release valve for transferring the contents to an aroma dispenser or other repository. Dora held the Olvac under Francesco's nose, and twisted the valve open.

The sudden scent of jasmine was overpowering. Francesco's nostrils twitched. He could smell it!

Dora sealed the valve, then opened the window to disperse the jasmine fragrance. She clasped Francesco's hand in her own, and tried to figure out how she could give him some benefit from his sense of smell. What would he most appreciate?

Memories were precious, especially to the old. The sense of smell had a deep connection to memory, with a marvelous power to evoke the past. What if she could find some scents from Francesco's life? In smelling them, he would be transported back to old times. It would give his trapped mind something to reflect upon and enjoy.

Dora smiled, convinced that she had hit upon an excellent plan. It would be her last service for Francesco, the last comfort she could give him before he departed this world and received his certain reward in the next.

The only problem would be finding the right scents. What should she choose? Francesco had started out teaching in makeshift shanty-town classrooms—did they have a specific smell? Dora's own memories of those schools didn't focus on any particular odor. Back then, the ambience had varied with whatever food vendor or trash fire or sewage problem dominated on any given day. That was before an American charity installed a network of Olvacs in the most malodorous areas, improving the environment by removing effluvial pollution. The smell of the slums had gone, although the actual slums were still there.

Maybe something from Francesco's personal life would be better, like the card games he'd always enjoyed. Dora had played in a few of those, and she mainly remembered the cheap cigarettes that so many people smoked. If she defied the hospice's no-smoking rule and lit up a cigarette, would that be specific enough to convey the milieu, or would it remind Francesco of other things than card games? People

smoked in a lot of places, after all. In any case, the stink of tobacco was too unpleasant for a deathbed.

What about Francesco's youth, before he came to the Philippines? Old people often said that childhood memories were the most potent of all. Dora, being only twenty-three, couldn't personally vouch for this, but she knew no reason to doubt it. And she'd heard Francesco talk nostalgically of his childhood in northern Italy: the snow, the mountains, the pine forests. . . . Surely he would enjoy being reminded of those days, if only she could find the right aroma to evoke them.

She had thought it silly of herself to wear her best clothes to visit Francesco, even though he was blind. Now, Dora blessed the impulse. Only by wearing her best outfit could she have entered this upmarket mall, where security guards ensured that customers weren't bothered by the sight or smell of riffraff. CCTV cameras scanned the crowd, while Olvac sniffers sifted everyone's personal odor for traces of explosives, toxins, drugs, and the like.

Dora gazed at the Million Scents Emporium's window display, watching the picture change from beaches to orchards to rose gardens as the appropriate odors wafted out. She was nervous, because any Olvacs imported from Europe would not be cheap. But she straightened her shoulders and strode through the door as if she visited every week.

Inside, the shop had a neutral, scentless atmosphere. Two women stood by the counter, talking to the shopkeeper about the latest fashionable fragrances from Hong Kong. Next to each rack of shelves there was a touch-screen catalogue. Dora activated one, and began browsing through the huge variety of products: natural odors from various environments; artificial scents created by perfumers and artists; specialist items with lengthy disclaimers. . . .

She knew she should navigate straight to the Italian environmental, but she couldn't resist indulging in a little fantasy. *If I were rich, I'd visit this mall every week. In a different world, I might have been a society lady chasing the latest trends, the hot new scents. And here I am, looking at the catalogue. If I were rich and fashionable, what could I buy?*

Fashions were set by celebrities, of course. Dora touched the "celebrity" tag, and the screen overflowed with famous names endorsing all kinds of natural and artificial fragrances, from get-up-and-go coffees to exotic flowers genetically engineered for delicate new aromas. Some of the stars even sold their own body odor: the ultimate celebrity perfume.

On impulse, Dora followed a link from an actress's own-brand range to a listing of films she'd starred in. You could buy Olvacs for all these films; time-release capsules released odors synchronously with the action. This had once been a mere gimmick, before pheromone-capture added genuine emotions to the mix, deepening the audience's immersion in the story.

Dora's mood soured as she realized what else the catalogue must contain. Delving into the specialist menus, she found bottled essences of fear, anger, bewilderment, disgust—all harvested from human sources. Some of those sources might be Dora's friends. Destitute shanty-town dwellers sometimes sold themselves to be milked for pheromones; but they had to experience an intense stimulus to produce the required reactions. A horror-film Olvac contained the genuine fear and terror of impoverished, desperate people.

This was what Manna fought against: the hardship and lack of options that led to such degradation. When investigating employment disputes, Dora had seen quota-based contracts that took no account of desensitization, meaning victims had to endure ever stronger triggers to produce the same quantity of pheromones. Supposedly it wasn't torture if the employee had signed a consent form.

Abandoning her tainted fantasy of wealth, Dora returned to the task that had brought her to the shop. She selected the "natural" category, then "European: Italy," and skimmed through the entries. *Pine forest, Lombardy. 1 in stock.*

They had it! But the catalogue displayed a price that made her flinch. She didn't have nearly that amount. If she went home, she could perhaps scrape it together from friends and neighbors, if they knew it was for Francesco's benefit. Of all those who'd given her messages of gratitude to pass on to him, surely some would contribute to help ease his passing.

Yet a doubting voice in her mind spoke with Francesco's resonant tones. *Is that really the best use of their money? They have little enough of it.* She knew that Francesco would disapprove, saying he didn't need this gesture: he'd tell Dora and her friends to keep their money for more important things.

Dora clenched her teeth in frustration, uncertain what to do.

"Can I help you?" said the shopkeeper—Andres, the other women had called him. They'd spoken in English, but he addressed Dora in Tagalog.

"Yes, you can," Dora replied, and gave Andres her best smile. "I need to buy this, but I can't afford the list price. Is there any room for negotiation? It's not for me, it's for Francesco Pezzati."

She hoped the name would still carry weight, after Francesco's years of retirement in obscurity. The shopkeeper was middle-aged, and a Filipino like herself. Surely he would remember.

"Francesco Pezzati," he repeated. "Father Francesco, from Manna?"

Dora nodded. Andres gazed at her with suspicion. "If it's for him, why isn't he buying it?"

"Because he's dying!" Dora snapped, and then regretted her tone. She needed the shopkeeper's goodwill. In a softer voice, she said, "He's on his deathbed, and he's already lost his sight and hearing. I want to give him a scent from his childhood, something to soothe him as he passes away. But because he grew up in Italy, it has to be one of these imports in your catalogue."

"I see. It's a sad situation, and I'd like to help," Andres said. "Still, I can't give the stock away, otherwise I'd go bankrupt. I can let you have a discount of, say, twenty percent, if it's truly for the Church."

Dora recognized the opening offer of a haggle. "I'm very poor," she said. "I don't normally come to shops like this. I grew up in the shanty towns, where Francesco did his holy work. I can give you five thousand pesos, and that's all I have."

The gulf between the two offers was enormous. Andres spread his arms as if helpless, and said, "I can discount my profit, but I can't sell below cost price."

An uncomfortable pause followed. Dora couldn't afford to increase her offer, but she wouldn't leave the shop until she had to.

"Father Francesco was very popular in his time," the shopkeeper said in a contemplative tone. "Dedicated, incorruptible, almost saintly. . . . Wait here a moment."

Andres disappeared into the stockroom for a few minutes, then returned with two Olvacs. He put one of them on the counter and said, "That's the Italian pine forest. You can have it, in return for one small favor."

The other Olvac looked like the conical harvesters on the trellis in the hospice garden. "All you need to do," Andres continued, "is put this in Francesco's room, as close to him as possible, and make sure the intake isn't obstructed. Then, after he dies, bring it back here."

That sounded simple enough. But Dora couldn't understand the rationale. "It's a scent collector, isn't it? Why would you want to harvest the smell of Francesco's room? If I've already opened the other one, it'll just smell like a pine forest."

"Not quite, because you'll have released the forest scent *before* Francesco dies. . . ."

The shopkeeper's voice tailed off, as if he expected Dora to realize the implication. But she was baffled.

"I guess you haven't heard of the Odor of Sanctity," Andres said.

Dora recognized the phrase from stories about heroes in the history of the Church, but she couldn't recall any details. Francesco's teaching had focused more upon modern, practical issues.

Andres continued, "It's not something that the Church emphasizes nowadays, but in my line of work—well, you might say I have a professional interest."

Trying not to sound snappish, Dora said, "What do you mean?"

"In the Middle Ages, and sometimes more recently," Andres explained, "there are many accounts of saints producing a heavenly aroma from their corpse after their death. Obviously this is only hearsay, because there was never any way of actually preserving such an odor—not until the invention of the Olvac."

Dora struggled to absorb this. "But Francesco isn't a saint," she said at last.

"He's a good candidate," Andres replied. "And remember, whenever someone is canonized, that's only a declaration of sainthood. It doesn't actually *make* them a saint, because they were always a saint even before canonization. The declaration is just paperwork, the official recognition. Our modern procedures are more bureaucratic, but in the Middle Ages many saints arose by acclamation of the faithful. The presence of the Odor of Sanctity was sometimes cited as *evidence* of sainthood."

The shopkeeper had an eager gleam in his eye. Dora wondered how seriously to take all this. The thought of Francesco as a saint was disturbing—saints were remote, abstract figures; Francesco was a real man with foibles and flaws.

Right now, her priority was to comfort Francesco while he yet survived. Anything else could be dealt with later. "All right," she said. "I'll do it."

Andres gave her the Olvacs. Before she left the shop, Dora couldn't resist asking, "What is the Odor of Sanctity supposed to smell like?"

"In the old accounts, it's often described as something like roses. But who knows?" Andres shrugged. "It's a heavenly phenomenon, and we only have an earthly comparison."

Dora hurried back to the hospice, where she was relieved to discover Francesco still alive. As soon as she thought this, she felt guilty. *You wanted him to be alive because you went to all that trouble to get the Olvac. But it would be kinder if he had died already. It must be awful to slowly expire like this.*

The imported Olvac was a cylinder with a picture of trees on the front and some writing in—she assumed—Italian on the back. She cautiously opened the release valve at its lowest setting. A faint scent emerged. It was cool and fresh, the kind of natural odor that she associated with parks and gardens, from the rare occasions she'd visited such places. She had never been inside a real forest.

She opened the valve a little wider, and wafted the cylinder under Francesco's nose. His nostrils twitched. For a little while, there was no further reaction, and Dora felt a crushing sense of disappointment. But slowly, almost imperceptibly, a smile appeared on his wrinkled face, as if he'd drifted into a pleasant daydream.

With gladness in her heart, Dora said a prayer of thanks. She sat down in the visitor's chair for the start of another vigil.

Only then did she remember the other Olvac. She took it out and frowned. Something about it made her uncomfortable, but she couldn't pinpoint her objection. Perhaps it was the way that Andres had initially been reluctant to give her the Italian fragrance, before changing his mind when he thought of the Odor of Sanctity.

Yet whatever the shopkeeper's motivation, Dora had made an agreement with him. If she went back on it, that was tantamount to theft, since she'd already used

the forest scent. She shook her head, wishing she hadn't accepted the bargain so quickly. Now she was stuck with it.

She found an out-of-the-way spot underneath the bed, and left the Olvac there to gather whatever scent it could collect. Then she settled down to wait.

Every hour or so, the nurses came to check Francesco's condition, give him nutrition and hydration, make sure he hadn't developed bed sores, and so forth. Now that Francesco had lost his hearing, it was possible to talk openly about his situation. "He's fading," said one nurse. "God will take him soon."

Previously, Dora had only visited during the day, but now it was time to stay until the end. She sat with Francesco, clasping his hand and very occasionally—for she didn't want to overdo it—giving him a sniff of the pine forests of his childhood.

Throughout the afternoon and into the evening, numerous visitors arrived to pay their respects. Francesco had already received the Last Rites, but the hospice chaplain came again to offer final prayers. Many of these visitors, who likewise held Francesco in high regard, might have stayed for longer. But the room was small, and Dora, by virtue of having begun the vigil, was tacitly acknowledged to have the right of seeing it through.

Outside, darkness descended. The hospice grew quiet, and the flow of visitors ceased as the doors were locked for the night.

Francesco slept. Dora yawned. Against her will, she found herself becoming a little bored and impatient. She grimaced, and tried to push away such disrespectful thoughts. She yawned again....

And suddenly it was daylight. Sunshine streamed in through the open window, along with traffic noise from the street below. The room was full of purposeful bustle as doctors came and went, a trolley arrived, and a sheet-wrapped bundle was carefully lifted from the bed.

"He's dead!" Dora exclaimed. "You should have woken me."

A nurse said kindly, "He passed away in the night. We found out when we made the morning rounds, and by then there was no point in waking you—we thought you needed the rest."

The orderlies stood aside from the trolley to allow her a glimpse of Francesco. He looked so small! Perhaps it was only her imagination, but she thought that a faint smile still lingered on his pale, careworn face. Even as her tears started, she clung to the hope that she'd done enough to lighten Francesco's final hours.

A hand touched her shoulder. "Enough now. There'll be a viewing later, in church."

Numbly, Dora retreated. The trolley disappeared through the door, and everyone dispersed. Dora was left sitting in a chair in an empty room.

She let the grief wash over her. Francesco was dead. And this wasn't just the end of his own life, but the end of a period when his mission had improved the lives of thousands of people. What would become of Manna now? The organization had become paralyzed, mired in futile squabbling over diminishing funds and conflicting priorities, while everyone hoped Francesco would come out of retirement and lead them forward. Now the mission needed a new face; but in the meantime, there was still work to be done and people to be helped.

Dora got up to leave. Then she remembered the Olvac she'd placed to capture the Odor of Sanctity.

She hadn't noticed anything when she awoke. But by that time, someone had already opened the window, and any scent might have dissipated.

Who had been the first to discover Francesco's death? She should find out, and ask them whether they'd witnessed anything unusual. But it might be difficult. Unlike in the Middle Ages, people nowadays were so accustomed to pleasant smells, whether perfumes or air-fresheners or Olvacs, that they ignored them out of habit. And how

could anyone distinguish for sure between the Odor of Sanctity—if it existed—and the residue of the Italian pine forest, the white jasmine, the apples, and all the other scents inside the hospice?

Under the bed, the Olvac lurked. It should have collected any scent that appeared during the night. Its contents could be analyzed, molecule by molecule. If there had really been an Odor of Sanctity, then its presence would have been recorded . . . assuming that the odor was a material phenomenon, rather than a heavenly influence upon the senses.

Oh, just open it already! There was no sense in speculating, when she could easily discover whether the Olvac had collected anything. Curiosity burned inside her. She closed the window, retrieved the Olvac from its hiding place, and unsealed the release valve.

A fragrance emerged, a sublime aroma reminiscent of roses and spices, with rich undertones that she couldn't name. Suddenly the world was delicate as glass, holding people like flowers in a finely crafted vase; and Francesco was a withered bloom whose soul survived in a scent that permeated the universe and floated up to Heaven. Dora was a neighboring flower in that vase, and for a moment she experienced the sense of rightness she sometimes felt in church, when the choir's voices attained such harmony that the music seemed to exist of itself, saturating the air as though she could breathe it in and need no other sustenance.

The Odor of Sanctity! Francesco was a saint, and this was the proof.

Dora quickly closed the Olvac, then knelt and uttered a fervent prayer of thanks for being privileged to know such a holy man.

She put the Olvac away carefully, reverently. It took a few minutes for her attention to return to humbler concerns, such as her rumbling stomach. She left the hospice to get some food, for she hadn't yet eaten anything today. The smell of fried onions, normally so tantalizing, seemed mundane and coarse after the heavenly aroma she'd just inhaled.

Soon she found an unwelcome skepticism creeping into her mind. Why was the Odor of Sanctity so strong in the Olvac, when she hadn't noticed it in Francesco's room? Perhaps it had quickly dissipated after Francesco's death—or perhaps it was never in the room at all. Perhaps it had already been contained within the Olvac. She'd assumed it was empty when Andres gave it to her, but she had no proof of that.

Could the Odor have been faked—not just the smell of roses and spices, but the momentary transcendence she'd experienced? Maybe it had been some kind of drug, or maybe it was just another of the bottled pheromones in the Emporium's catalogue, harvested from those Protestant churches where ecstatic worshippers spoke in tongues and received visions in a kind of religious fever.

As soon as she thought this, she berated herself for being overly doubtful and cynical. Any miracle could be explained away, if you were determined to be skeptical.

Why should it be false? Well, why would Andres create a fake version of the Odor of Sanctity? Presumably so that he could sell it. He was a shopkeeper, after all.

Dora frowned as she considered her dilemma. She had agreed to return the Olvac to Andres. He would then, she assumed, seek to profit from it in some way. Dora felt an instinctive distaste for this, and she was strongly tempted to break the Olvac wide open, letting its contents disperse on the wind.

But if the Odor of Sanctity were genuine, then disposing of it would be disrespectful, perhaps even blasphemous. The Olvac might be a saint's relic, of the kind that the Church prized. Many of Manila's older churches had relics in their altar-stones.

She couldn't decide what to do. Yet she didn't need to act straight away; her decision could wait until the community had mourned Francesco. Dora returned to the hospice to inquire about the arrangements.

The body would arrive that evening at the church of Saint Teresa Margaret for two days of public visitation, before next week's funeral. Dora headed home, so that she could change her clothes to dress entirely in black. She kept the Olvac in her pocket, unwilling to be parted from her relic of Francesco. She would wear black for a year, in his memory.

Saint Teresa Margaret was the church that Francesco himself had built thirty years ago, when his mission began to grow in the shanty towns. Consequently it lacked the grandeur of the older churches in central Manila. Nevertheless, it was Francesco's spiritual home, and Dora was glad that he'd been brought here, where his people could easily visit him.

Francesco had been laid out with all due ceremony, his body dressed in accordance with his request to be buried wearing the barong Tagalog, the traditional costume of his adopted country. His white clothes contrasted sharply with the black apparel of the arriving mourners, emphasizing that he was already otherworldly, his soul as distant as his body was near.

In this public environment, a frozen calmness enveloped Dora and suppressed—for the time being—any outpourings of grief. Sitting in one of the rear pews, she watched visitors slowly file past the coffin. She bit her lip as she saw the shopkeeper, Andres, enter the church.

He approached the casket, peered inside, and crossed himself with every appearance of sincerity. Then he looked around until his gaze fixed on Dora.

"I'm sorry for your loss," Andres sat down next to her. "I heard on the radio that Francesco had died, so I came to offer my respects. That forest scent I gave you—did it ease his final hours?"

"Yes, it did," she admitted.

"That's good." He paused, and shifted in his seat to face Dora. "You remember our agreement, I'm sure. Did you put the Olvac in Francesco's room?"

Unwillingly, she nodded. "Was that an *empty* Olvac when you gave it to me?" she demanded.

"Of course it was," he said, sounding offended at her implied suspicion. "Do you mean it's no longer empty? Has it collected an aroma?"

"There's something inside," Dora said. "I wish I could believe that it wasn't already there before he died. If it was the genuine Odor of Sanctity, why was it so fleeting—why didn't we smell it the next morning? Why doesn't it still attend his body even now?"

Andres spread his arms wide. "I can't answer that. It's God's will." He leaned forward, his eyes glittering with excitement. "If the Olvac has preserved the Odor of Sanctity, we've been blessed with a miracle. But I'll need to check that it isn't just someone's perfume. Can I take a sample?"

"I left it at home," Dora lied, fearing that Andres might snatch the Olvac from her hands.

"You tantalize me. I've been dealing in scents all my life, and I've smelled everything that exists on Earth. How I long to experience an aroma from Heaven!"

Unmoved by this plea, Dora let the silence hang.

"I hope you left it somewhere safe," Andres said at last. "It's a priceless relic."

"Priceless indeed," said Dora. "The Church forbids the sale of relics." She'd learned this during her law studies.

"Since Francesco hasn't yet been declared a saint, it's not officially a relic," Andres said, in a tone of calm reasonableness.

"Yes, but as you so carefully explained to me, any saint was always a saint even before canonization. So, presumably, any relic was always a relic. Especially if it's the evidence of sainthood itself!"

Andres sighed. "You're naïve if you think that relics never change hands in return for . . . considerations, monetary or otherwise. Let's be practical about this. You have an opportunity to help a lot of people. I'm in the business of selling scents, and I can sell that Olvac for a good price. I need you to sign a certificate of authenticity, and in return I'll give you half of the proceeds. You can easily think of excellent uses for that—you could donate it to Manna, in Francesco's memory. I'll make a donation myself, from my own share."

"Absolutely not," Dora said quickly. In her heart she knew she'd spoken *too* quickly, reacting with instant revulsion because she didn't want to consider the concept. She didn't want to think what Francesco himself might have said: the practical Francesco who raised funds for schools, clinics, and housing.

She knew she should co-operate with Andres and accept his payment. After Francesco's retirement, Manna had stopped growing and now struggled to maintain its existing projects. The shopkeeper's money would find many uses.

Yet she remembered the fashionable women demanding ever more exotic and expensive scents. They would only value the Odor for its rarity, not for its sanctity.

"It's blasphemy!" she said. "How can the Odor of Sanctity be sprayed around at some stupid party? If those women want to use it as a status symbol, while they gossip about hairstyles and boyfriends . . . it's demeaning. I won't allow it."

Andres shook his head. "It's not like that. There are other kinds of clients. If we have a miraculous relic, then obviously its natural home is the Church. So I quietly sell the Olvac to someone rich who wants to make a grand gesture. He—or she—donates it to the Church in the full glare of publicity. They get the glory, the Church gets its relic, and Manna gets a hefty donation from the proceeds. Everybody wins."

"Really?" Dora hadn't imagined such a scenario, yet it sounded plausible. Perhaps it was even reasonable. Still, she didn't know it would actually happen that way. She could only trust Andres to find a buyer of the kind he described.

Why was she so suspicious? Why did she keep believing the worst of Andres?

Dora realized she had no real proof that Andres had any sinister intention at all. She only distrusted him because she suspected him of faking the Odor of Sanctity contained within the Olvac.

And why did she dispute the Odor? Did she disbelieve in God? No! Did she disbelieve that Francesco was saintly? No!

She doubted because of the circumstances, because the Odor hadn't manifested precisely as she thought it should have done. Put like that, it sounded presumptuous, as if she were reprimanding Heaven.

Maybe she needed a little more faith. Maybe it didn't even matter whether the Odor was genuine. After all, that didn't affect the truth of Francesco's life, or the worthiness of his mission.

Perhaps she should give the Olvac to Andres, as she'd originally agreed, and allow him to raise some of the money that Manna desperately needed.

"You make a good case," she said. "But let me see Francesco one last time."

It was silly, of course. Francesco, lying motionless in his coffin, could hardly signal any approval or disapproval. Nevertheless, she felt impelled to take a final look at him. A hazy plan was coalescing in her brain.

Approaching from the pews, she was on the opposite side of the casket to most of the visitors. No one could see her hand as it reached into her pocket.

Surreptitiously, she cracked open the Olvac. Its aroma began to waft out over the coffin, into the church.

Soon the mourners began to nudge each other and remark upon the scent. "It's the Odor of Sanctity!" Dora exclaimed, pretending to have only just noticed it herself. "Francesco must be a saint!"

A ripple of conversation and argument spread among the crowd. New arrivals rushed forward, eager to smell the reputed miracle, and they began exclaiming in awe. A crush soon developed; the church wardens had to hurriedly form a barrier to protect the casket.

The chant arose: "Saint Francesco! Saint Francesco!"

Dora smiled as she slipped away. The scent and the acclamation would create a storm of publicity—a perfect opportunity to revitalize the mission, appeal for donations, and continue Manna's work. Doubters might talk of Olvac, but believers would talk of Heaven.

She felt that Francesco, ever the self-publicist, would have relished this attention. And since Manna had never been effective under anyone else's banner, Francesco's elevation was the only answer: even after death, he would remain Manna's public face. If Francesco's organization couldn't function without him, he'd had no business resigning.

"Your retirement is over, Father," she said. "Get back to work! You're not just a figurehead—if you're a real saint, then you can work miracles. And every miracle will create more publicity, more donations, more benefit to the poor."

Dora closed the Olvac before all its contents escaped. It was a true relic now, destined for the altar-stone of Francesco's church.

As she walked from the churchyard to the street, a hand grabbed her shoulder.

"Nicely staged," said Andres. "But you broke our agreement, and you lied to me. Is that the kind of behavior that Francesco taught you?"

"I'm sorry," said Dora. "It was such a good opportunity, I couldn't pass it up. And really, if you cared about the poor as much as you care about your profit, you'd understand that."

"Oh, I do understand it. But your little stunt won't work if I announce that the Odor was concocted in my shop, rather than emanating from Heaven."

Dora stopped dead, anxiety washing over her. If he made enough of a fuss, Andres could ruin everything. She tried to project bravado as she said, "God doesn't have to intervene directly. He works through us. Even if you claim that you created it in your shop, who's to say that you weren't inspired by God?"

Yet even as she spoke, she knew it wasn't enough. Skeptics would seize any excuse to doubt. If Andres denounced the Odor as a fake, Francesco's sainthood would evaporate—and so would Manna and all its good works.

Besides, she did feel guilty. "I know I promised to give you the Olvac," she said. "And I will. After all, you can say that you happened to be carrying an empty harvester, and when the divine aroma appeared, you managed to capture it."

"Yes, of course," said Andres. "That was exactly my plan." He held out his hand for her to return the Olvac.

"Not yet," Dora said. "What matters isn't the Olvac itself, but what's inside. And, really, there's no reason it has to stay in just *one* Olvac."

She remembered Francesco's arithmetic lessons, and how he'd explained that there was no largest number, and no smallest fraction. You could always divide further, and still have something.

"I need some of it, as a relic for the altar-stone," she said. "As for the rest—how about we agree that you can do whatever you want with it, as long as half of the proceeds go to Manna? I'll trust you to maximize your profit, and thereby maximize our donations."

Andres smiled. "When I made that offer earlier, you declined because—as you so carefully explained to me—the Church forbids the sale of relics. Have you changed your mind already?"

"Only because you give me no choice," Dora snapped. "We'll draw up a contract tomorrow morning. After we've signed, I'll give you the Olvac."

He might not need it. If Andres had created the scent in his shop, he already knew the recipe and could manufacture as much as he liked. Yet he'd only said that he could claim to have concocted the Odor—not that he actually had. Perhaps it was self-delusion, but Dora wanted to believe in at least the possibility of the Odor being genuine, so as not to collude in profiting from something that she knew to be fake.

Reluctantly, she shook hands with Andres. He departed with a jaunty stride, no doubt thinking of new products to sell. Dora began making her own way home, her head full of misgivings.

Although she'd said that Andres had given her no choice, it wasn't strictly true. She could have defied his threat to denounce the Odor. Indeed, she still had that option—she hadn't yet signed a contract, or relinquished the Olvac.

Should she take the shopkeeper's money? The equation hadn't changed since Francesco's retirement. In order to raise donations, Manna had to submit to the cult of publicity and all its attendant compromises. If the cause was worthy, then so were the sacrifices. Francesco had believed in that cause. So did Dora, and now she better understood the pressures that had driven him.

She could already imagine the Emporium's new catalogue, as fashionable customers asked Andres for the latest novelty scents. Francesco had always been a tireless self-promoter in the cause of fundraising, and now he would have his own celebrity perfume.

Maybe some of his saintliness would rub off on its wearers. That really would be a miracle.

But God doesn't have to intervene directly. He works through us. Dora felt an electric sense of purpose filling her, as she realized her task. She needed to reach out to the customers who bought Francesco's scent, and convert their superficial interest into something more meaningful. After expressing gratitude for their donation to Manna, she would flatter their sense of piety, appeal to their better nature, explain what else they could do. . . . She would transform them from purchasers of sanctity into paragons of it. ○

How many millennia
Have you endured
To be here at this moment:

Dragging your winter legs
And your slow antennae
Across the grey doorstep

Pulling yourself grimly
Through landscapes of brisk feet
Scintillating poison and sharp cold

Determined to outlast
Prettier, cleverer species
And to be there

When the red orb
Palely visible on the horizon
Fades out entirely

—Fiona Moore

STONE ROACH



Coping with plague and other aspects of a difficult life on a frontier planet, one young man learns that the best way to survive may be to follow what . . .

GRANDMA SAID

R. Neube

Grandma drew me aside at the funeral of her third husband. She leaned against my ear. A mix of garlic and mouthwash washed over me.

"I'll tell you a secret, but don't ever tell anyone. Promise?"

"Sure thing, Grandma."

"Germs can't survive laughter. As long as you're laughing, disease'll leave you alone."

Grandma, of course, died in a hovercraft crash while driving her best friend to Bingo. Laughter meant nothing when a boulder crashed through the windshield at two hundred klicks an hour.

But her advice was never far from my thoughts, especially at the age of sixteen when I became a plague cleanser.

We parked in front of a burrow as Meade made its daily dash across the face of the sun. The cloud of ice surrounding the moon twinkled like a million diamonds.

My boss double-checked my envirsuit, adding a layer of duct tape across the palms of my gloves.

Grace Lungren's voice was a static song over the suit's radio. "Low bid gloves. The palms always tear at the worst time. What do you do when your suit is compromised?"

I knuckled the spray tank next to me. "Stop whatever I'm doing and spray myself. Then I immediately return to the hover, decontaminate in the airlock, and only then do I repair my suit."

Grace nodded.

My boss was an old hand. She had become a plague cleanser during the first outbreak of cholly fever in '51.

"Never worry what you may contaminate along the way. Take care of yourself first. Afterwards you can fret about the spores you may have spread."

As an apprentice cleanser, I lugged the equipment, from the spray tanks of disinfectant to the body bags. Grace was petite, yet her short legs scurried her into the burrow before I could reach the sidewalk. My boss waited inside the burrow's airlock.

"Which apartment?" she asked.

"Nine. I didn't think cholly struck in the winter."

"Probably a latent case. A few spores were hiding in the vic's lungs. Immune system gets whacked by the flu or too much gin and *voila*, they start feeding on lung tissue. Bang, a few spores become a fungal army."

"Lucky, as far as your training goes. One real cleansing is worth a hundred drills."

I chuckled, mindful of Grandma's advice. "Haven't I already endured a few hundred drills?"

"You'll suffer hundreds more before plague season kicks into high gear this summer. You'll rue you didn't get a restaurant job."

My parents wanted me to sling burgers like my high school peers. Yeah, like ten bucks an hour and all the buffalo I could eat matched up to the hundred an hour an accredited plague cleanser earned. My friends had jobs; me, I was preparing for a vocation.

Or my death, as the parental units constantly nagged.

I wasn't scared. Grandma's secret would protect me.

Besides, since Emily dumped me, how could death scare me? Well, we hadn't exactly gone on a first date, so I wasn't sure she technically dumped me. But she had sprayed me with mace. Didn't that count?

Outside the apartment, I erected a lamp tower, dousing the hallway with sufficient UV to give me a summer tan in five minutes. Spores hated UV. Grace held a boxy magnifier up to her faceplate, scanning the area for spores. It was rare to find spores in a burrow's hallway, though no one knew why.

Grace entered the apartment. I nearly knocked the lamp tower over as I followed with the gear. She handed me a sniffer. I dumped the cargo before I deployed the device at precisely one point four meters above the floor. On its third inhale it found a spore in the air.

"A single spore?" I asked.

"You often see that when a vic isn't found until weeks after dying. When there's no coughing to spread them, the spores settle. Look here." She handed me the magnifier, pointing at the sofa. Its worn material was carpeted with dots glowing pink due to the magnifier's filters.

"The vic must have been a couch potato."

We found the corpse in bed. The TV blared a nature show, showing the wildlife of Earth before World War III eradicated life on that distant planet.

"Sometimes I wonder if TV doesn't increase the growth rate of the fungus. I can't tell you how many vics I've found in front of the tube."

The old man was knotted like a pretzel. Contortions were the final phase of the disease, as if the body was trying to wring the disease from itself. I did my best not to laugh externally, though I found the position of the corpse hysterical. Silent laughter, I posited, was equally effective fighting disease.

I set to work before Grace ordered me. Unfastening the grills and filters to the ventilation system, I tossed balloons filled with fungicide into each shaft. The volatile mixture evaporated as soon as it hit the air, forming a thick white fog.

Spraying the 'cide was tedium incarnate, sweeping back and forth in an oft-practiced arc. My first two weeks on the job had been spent spraying the floor of the warehouse in which the cleansers were based. Having the boss lecture me if I missed a single square millimeter was all the direction I got in the arcane art.

While I did the boring work, Grace ran spores through the fingerprinter. The gene reader would identify which mutation of the fungus it was. Types A and C were 99 percent fatal. There had only been four known victims of Type B; all had survived with full immunity to the other strains. Type D only killed a third of its victims, but did not immunize its survivors against the other types.

The appearance of Type E, according to the brain trust, was years overdue. Their memos reeked of fear for our future dealing with a deadlier variant of the disease.

Grace, on the other hand, prattled endlessly about the Influenza pandemic of 1918, the Black Death, and a hundred other plagues throughout human history. Germs tended to mellow in their old age, she insisted.

After the test showed Type C, I helped Grace load the old man into a body bag. Then I sprayed the bag before we loaded it into a second body bag.

We placed the body in the hallway under the UV tower. I moved our equipment under the lamps while Grace checked my work with the ventilation shafts.

Now came the coolest part of my new job. I got to set up a dozen small thermite bombs. One click of the remote and the contents of the apartment were incinerated.

The fungicide treatment alone sufficed to wipe out the cholly, but in cases where the victim lived alone, the Health Department required a controlled burn. Overkill was a cleanser's middle name.

Once we disinfected our suits—and changed into fresh ones—we inspected the other apartments in the burrow. They were clean.

We drove the body down to Miller's Crossing, dumped him in the pit, and poured a ton of concrete over the body.

Just another day in the life of a cleanser.

I went to Plague House every day after school. Since I was a teen, the law required me to work every day for a minimum of three hours, courtesy of the Delinquent Act. Busy teens, the old farts legislated, didn't have time to get into trouble.

Cholly had originated as a foot fungus among the alien Dyb'. Who could have imagined glorified athlete's foot would find human lungs a better home?

In the past century, cholly epidemics had visited eleven colonies. Two of them had been nuked out of existence. Eight had been utterly consumed by the plague, dying under the shell of armed quarantine. And there was us, New Prozac.

Yeah, the name of our world was a bad joke—the downside of Captain Jameson's great journey where she catalogued four hundred and nineteen worlds for future human occupation. New Prozac was near the end of her voyage. She had simply run out of names.

The pundits thought the ninety-seven thousand inhabitants of New Prozac had run out of luck when the fungus manifested itself.

Now it was twenty years later. Thanks to the State Mother Project and the clone vats, we had stabilized our population.

Now the plague came every summer. . . .

During English Four, Molly Kane suffered a seizure. Until blood volcanoed from her mouth and nostrils, it was just another day of school.

I leapt to the door, throwing the lock. "Everyone to the far side of the room. Liu, please throw something over Molly."

"But she's still breathing."

"Not for long." I drew myself to my full height and blocked the door. "I'm sorry. Poor Molly has cholly. Everybody move to the far side of the room. We have to stay here until a cleanser arrives."

My peers had grown up dying. There was no panic, only resignation to our fungal fate. Only our teacher crumpled, wailing like a banshee beneath his bad perm. I raced to Sims' side and kicked his head. Knocked him out cold.

It took twenty-eight minutes for the first shift to get to the school. Pathetic. Plague House was only a block down the street. Xavier looked like he had spent the night sleeping in a dumpster.

"Hey, Clyde," he said when I greeted him at the door. The speaker on the neck of his rumpled envirsuit gave his voice a faint reverb.

"Victor. My name is Victor Basescu. I work with Grace Lungren on the swing shift."

He laughed. "We have a Vic dealing with our vics?"

"Yeah, yeah." I rolled my eyes.

He waved me away before approaching Molly. "Oh shit, she's still alive."

Xavier's partner appeared with their apprentice. The partner shouted, "Look straight into box." She worked us over with a magnifier. It was a good way to distract the students while Xavier injected poor Molly with an overdose of narcotics.

The most frightening thing about cholly was how most people did not express symptoms until they collapsed. Most folks died within minutes of spewing the blood released by digested lung tissue.

I tried to recall whether Molly had been coughing during class. More importantly, coughing in my direction. I knew the cheerleader hadn't touched me; doubted if I was popular enough to merit being coughed on.

The apprentice finished erecting the lamp tower. We were instructed to slowly rotate in the intense light, pausing only when the partner swabbed our nostrils for spores.

Grace arrived with a cartload of gear. She kept yawning, fogging her faceplate. In a trice, she erected two screens to mask us while we stripped and dressed in gauze masks, hospital gowns, and slippers—all treated with fungicide. Our clothes went into bags, along with our books and personal items.

I watched the apprentice spray and bag my classmate. She was awkward with the zippers, filling me with a sense of superiority. Though I'd seen her only minutes before, I couldn't recall Molly's face.

On the bright side, the rest of the school day was spent at the hospital, getting comprehensive scans. At least my class got examined before the rest of the school was bussed in for tests.

When I reached Plague House, the board showed Xavier and company working a double shift cleansing the school. Night shift was also assigned to the task. Grace and I were to cover the rest of the city for a double shift.

"If they make me work longer than three hours, don't they have to pay me?" I filled my mug from the pot. The coffee tasted as if it'd been brewed last year.

Grace groaned as she rose from the couch and fetched a cup of her own. "You won't get paid a penny until you graduate to cleanser. Me, I'm banking two thou today."

"But I'll get a double per diem, right? One per full shift, right?"

"Sure thing, Vic. Plus, the state is required to feed you every full shift."

I could sell the meal coupons for ten bucks each. Not much, but better than the nominal five bucks per diem I received.

"I thought cholly outbreaks didn't occur in winter."

"Type C has never emerged in the winter before. There must be a Typhoid Mary coughing around the city. It's time for you to learn how to connect the dots. Unless we get called for a cleansing, you'll be on the computer, finding what your schoolmate and last night's vic had in common."

"If anything."

"Twenty-two years of experience says they did." Grace poured herself more coffee.

I emptied the pot into my mega-mug. I gulped despite the scald.

"Old and young don't mix in too many situations. So it ought to be easier than you think."

I called Lennie Lorre. In every school there was one person in the center of the gossip-web. Lennie told me that Molly's state-mandated job was visiting the infirm.

Using Grace's passwords, I went to Social Service's database. Sure enough, Molly had filed a report last Monday afternoon about cleaning, cooking, and reading to the other vic. The Health Department hadn't made the connection because they were three weeks behind logging Molly's reports.

Grace chewed her lower lip as she read my report. "Has her family been checked?"

I smiled, being a step ahead. "I called the hospital. Due to the crowding, they've only been able to take nasal swabs. So far, nothing."

Hitting the Civic site, I noted with glee that my school would be closed until next Tuesday. So far, our colony's government took no official notice of the school outbreak, since no other cholly victims had been identified. Remarkably, the media failed to mention the old high school where an outbreak fourteen years ago had led to burning the structure after a hundred died in a single week.

Going to the Plague Page, I noticed the two deaths were all that had been reported this month.

I kept waiting for a call to action, but none came. Instead, we drove to Miller's Crossing to dump all the clothes and belongings collected from my class. I got to use the concrete mixer for the first time.

"When your grandparents came to New Prozac, there was talk that this world would be a new Eden. Life was just crawling from the oceans. Humanity could terraform on a blank slate. We were a miracle colony." My father paced while he lectured.

My mother and her other husband sat on the opposite side of the living room in max glower mode.

I stared out the window watching a methane rain, wondering if the terraformers had the slightest clue what they were doing.

"Get to the point," Mom said.

"We've already had this discussion a million times," I said. "Cleansing is not a hazardous job. And once I complete my apprenticeship, I'm eligible for a full ride to the university. Plus, my police record will be erased. Didn't you all tell me to straighten up and fly right?"

"Not hazardous? You work at a fucking PLAGUE HOUSE!"

"Cleansers are 30 percent less likely to die of cholly than civilians," I countered.

I did not add the explanation—most of my peers committed suicide when they came up positive during our weekly cholly test. Indeed, the death rate among cleaners was so high that the colony erased the figures from their records. Someone—I suspected Grace—had kept a list of dead cleaners carved into a basement wall. Two hundred and eleven names. As far as I knew, nobody had retired.

"It's too dangerous."

"Mom," I replied.

"Victor," they chorused.

The argument spiraled for hours.

But I never told them about my secret weapon—Grandma's insight. A promise was sacred.

A fortnight later, we had our next case. He was a strapping middle-aged man, an athlete beginning to soften around the belly. He had died in his easy chair watching porn on TV.

He had been found by his children, rangy college youths with ancient eyes. Nasal swabs and scans declared they had been lucky. Nonetheless, Grace sent them to the hospital for a thorough screening.

"Looks like he broke his nose while convulsing. It must have been fast."

Not at all a victim pretzel, I observed. "Maybe he had a weak heart."

"Wouldn't be the first time."

I deployed the sniffer. "Whoa, I'm getting over a hundred spores per sample. It's a miracle those siblings weren't dosed when they found their dad."

"There are no miracles." She brought the magnifier up to her faceplate again. "This is strange. Look at his moustache. There's an entire colony living in those

hairs. But do you see any blood that didn't come from his broken nose? Any cough splatter?"

I checked my sniffer. Why was that little yellow light blinking? Crap, I was supposed to have memorized all the functions of the sniffer.

Turning my back to the boss, I shelled to the manual on my chip-plate. Banging keys on my handheld computer, I found the blinking light meant the sample was contaminated.

"Oh mannn," I groaned as I went to the hover to fetch our Frankenstein Science Kit. I had failed its use twice during training, since the black box demanded its samples just so.

Test one . . . invalid.

Test two . . . invalid.

Test three . . . I squinted at the monitor. Tapped its side.

"It's reading a chlorine compound on the spores. Chlorine? What did I do wrong?"

"Chlorine makes sense." Grace chuckled. "Just when I thought I'd seen everything. What were the names of the sons? Did they mention where they work?"

I checked my chip-plate. "Aaron and Dylan Wyeth. It doesn't say where they work. But give me a minute." I tapped into the Civic database.

Grace said, "I bet one of them works for the Cholly Research Center. CRC kills the spores with chlorine gas." Her hands vanished behind the victim. "Somebody snapped his neck, then made it look like a cholly convulsion."

"A murder? Wow."

She stripped off her helmet.

"One thing has been bugging me, boss. Why is it called cholly fever? The victims don't sweat. They don't live long enough for a fever."

"Back in the good old days when the fungus first started infecting humans, it wasn't deadly. No worse than the flu, except the fevers ran higher."

"Then shouldn't that variant be called Type A?"

"Should be. Trouble was, when the spores mutated into a fatal form, it occurred on a colony that had never seen the non-deadly cholly. So the outbreak was labeled Shimerman Syndrome in the medical literature for years before it was connected to cholly. You should know this. I assigned you to read Cummings' *History of Cholly*."

"Busted. I'll get to it this week. Promise."

"Bet there's a tidy inheritance involved here."

She dialed the cops.

Since poor Molly's demise, I was a big man on campus. People I had been in school with for twelve years finally knew my name. Truth be known, 90 percent weren't impressed about me dealing with the plague. However, I had kicked everyone's most-hated teacher Sims in the face and gotten away with it.

Sims pretended not to remember his hysteria. Claimed he stumbled and fell, knocking himself out. It was a polite fiction worthy of an English teacher. But he did give me an A on my lousy book report on *Finnegan's Wake*.

It was my first A of the semester.

Granted, Emily continued to pretend I didn't exist. She transferred from the history class we had together to Geometry Three in order to avoid me.

Emily had never asked me for more than help in history class. It had been love at first sight for me. It never occurred to me that all those hours of tutoring over her dining room table meant nothing to her beyond a better grade.

Nonetheless, I scored a date for Saturday night. Alicia was a Grey, dyed from hair to eyes to skin. It was some kind of sub-culture that popped up last year. I knew of it, but not the whys. It was one of the quieter of the dozen fads to wildfire through our school.

"So, where do you work?" I asked. My mind was blank when she touched my hand. It was the best I could do beyond sweating and stammering.

"I don't have to," she replied, touching my cheek.

Her parents had clout, I thought. Then she kissed my cheek, and I forgot how to think.

Alicia—though I had yet to learn her last name—was my first date.

My date proved to be dinner with her family. Alicia came from an old-fashioned home; the house rule was that they dined together. It soon became clear I was there to appall her parents. The skin dye didn't hide the myriad scars on her wrists. How had I not noticed that in school? Her wide, wild eyes glistened. As if she had just finished a marathon, she panted, trembled as she spoke.

Over shepherd's pie, all she wanted to talk about was my work as a cleanser, about poor Molly's death. Her parents rapidly lost their appetites, despite the primo eats. Sad to say, I was so hungry that I devoured my meal while Alicia ranted.

"What they refuse to understand," Alicia said, "is that we're all dead. I'm grey as a corpse because...."

As she rambled, I debated telling her how grey the vics weren't. But I saw the futility of explanation in her parents' weary eyes.

After the mother politely asked me to leave, she and Alicia screamed into the living room. I rose, hoping to retreat with a modicum of dignity.

The father hemmed and hahed. "Let me be frank. We're worried about you infecting our delicate jewel. By accident, of course."

"I understand," I muttered while staring at my feet.

Alicia stormed into the dining room waving a butcher knife.

I hadn't expected that much baggage crammed inside a sixteen-year-old package. But suddenly it made sense why she didn't work. I'd assumed her parents had political clout. Instead, she was exempt due to the psycho clause.

Deploying the crisis skills Grace had taught me, I spoke softly while smiling and patting her shoulder. I took the knife away and tossed it into the corner. That commenced a three-way family screaming storm.

Eyeing the knife on the floor, Alicia stammered, "All I ask is to be treated like an adult. We could all die tomorrow. Tell them, Victor. Molly could've infected me."

Alicia's sweat gave life to her dye job, the grey shimmering. "We should embrace the grey death."

Jumping into my protective garb, I fled. I didn't stop until I reached the corner. Grabbing my knees, I tried to fill my lungs. Was this how the vics felt in those final moments?

Pounding feet interrupted my wheezing. Three Greys flanked me.

"Could I have your autograph?" asked the lanky one.

I laughed until I cried, until I dropped. They finally walked away.

After I walked into the bathroom at Plague House I found it impossible to laugh, even silently. Xavier was sitting on the john, twisted like a pretzel. Before the cholly got him, he'd spewed blood like a fire hose. I stood frozen. My bare hand had splashed blood when I pulled the stall door open.

"What kind of perv doesn't lock the damned door?" I yelled at the corpse, adding a kick for emphasis.

I raced into the warehouse to spray myself with fifty liters of disinfectant. Yelled my lungs empty for Grace.

She appeared with a bayonet in one hand and her coffee mug in the other. After I explained, she ordered me into my envirsuit, then told me to drive myself to the hospital.

Xavier. Grace made fun of him because of his caution, his terror of the fungi.

Alicia's words rang through my head. *We're already dead.*

Until I finished the full scan, I barely held my breakfast down. Clear lungs. Were there two more beautiful words in the universe?

When I called the boss with my good news, she ordered me back to Plague House for ten hours of cleansing. During the last hour of his life, Xavier had coughed through every centimeter of our converted warehouse. Fortunately, the other day-shift cleanser had been picking up a thousand liters of disinfectant from the factory, so Xavier had been on his own.

Xavier's death was not listed on the Civic site. Nor was it reported in the media. But the basement wall recorded his passing.

Cleansers did not die. They simply ceased to exist.

Alas, the gossip mill brought the news to my parents via the quantum state that allowed them to start building their tempers before I discovered poor Xavier. I was ambushed as I dragged myself into the house.

A sense of *déjà vu* overwhelmed me, harkening back to the evening when my parents had bailed me out of jail after I was busted with my buddies for vandalizing the Chamber of Commissioners. We'd invaded the government complex, placing cow dung in each of the twenty-eight seats where our colony's leaders sat while passing the *inane Delinquent Act*.

After we argued through the night, my parents took me downtown. Lawyer Mom dragged me in front of Juvenile Court. I knew Judge Stewart from my bust. Stewart was a matronly type, well over a century old, yet vibrating with the energy few youth possessed.

"Citizen Basescu, I'm not surprised to see you in my court again. What's the charge this time?" asked Stewart.

Colony Attorney Colbert shrugged his shoulders, pointing at Mom.

She rose. "Your Honor, under Section 179.64, I request the court intervene to protect my son. He is a danger to himself. He has taken a job as an apprentice cleanser. He is sixteen and working the most dangerous job on the planet. This isn't right. He's a child!"

"Mom!"

"You volunteered?" asked the judge.

"Yes, I did. I'm working for society."

"Shut up, Victor."

"Yes, Mom."

"Give me a minute." Stewart banged keys on her terminal, drawing up my file. "Are you contesting your son's mental health?"

"I contend he's too young to be exposed to cholly on a daily basis."

"We're all exposed to cholly, sooner or later," replied Stewart.

"But he's too young to—"

"Victor, you volunteered of your own free will?"

"After my previous brush with the law, I wanted to do something important."

Judge Stewart tsked as she read the screen. "You earned a thirty-one on your Maturity Test. That's six points above legal adult. My husband only scored a twenty-seven."

"Your Honor, this isn't about tests. Victor is still a child. One of the cleansers died at the Plague House yesterday. I don't want my son—"

"Citizen Basescu, your son passed the Maturity Test. By law, he is an adult."

"Does that mean I'm safe from that damned fool Delinquent Act?"

"Victor!"

Judge Stewart almost smiled. "That has nothing to do with maturity, only age. Anyone deemed mature can choose any job he or she desires. That is the law. While I sympathize with your fears regarding your son, there is nothing I can do about his

decisions. Indeed, we owe the cleansers a great debt. Without them, the plague would have overrun our colony like it has so many others."

"My son. . . ."

As they argued, my eyelids became lead weights. Emily's words echoed through my mind. *Why do you think I would care about a nobody like you doing nothing with your life?*

Why indeed.

Mom flung precedents. In lawyer frenzy, she didn't notice me leaving the court-room. Stewart did. She gave me a wink.

Strolling to Plague House, I crawled onto one of the cots they kept in back for long shifts.

I slept like a rock.

I stood in front of my employee locker, sipping a triple espresso and trying to decide whether to go home or sleep another night at Plague House. The trouble with sleeping there was going to school smelling like disinfectant.

Alicia appeared at my side like an angry wraith. She hadn't been at school for weeks. I'd glimpsed her occasionally across the street from our headquarters, lurking behind sulfite blooms. Once, I went out to see what she wanted, but she ran away.

The grey of her eyes was a shade Nature had never used. Thrusting a card into my hand, she grinned with rabid enthusiasm.

I'LL NEVER SPEAK TO YOU AGAIN, said the card.

"What the hell?"

She opened her mouth to show she had cut off part of her tongue. And she smiled. Once again an angel.

Another card. I HAVE TO SEE THE CHOLLY.

"You don't have to see death. It sees you."

Her index finger tapped the card.

I read her lips begging, "Please."

Taking her hand, I was torn between its frozen nature, and the fact that I'd never seen longer fingers.

"You really don't want to die."

She jerked free. Her jerkin had six pockets. She searched them all before finding the right card.

WE ARE ALL DYING. I CANT WAIT.

"You don't know what you're saying."

She nodded as if her head was on a spring. Her right hand gripped my forearm. Her sleeve hiked up, exposing a bandaged wrist. As her fingernails dug into my flesh, dots of crimson colored the gauze.

HELP ME.

"That's what shrinks are for. I can't help you kill yourself."

She pulled me deeper into the warehouse. As we went through the maze of supplies, I realized she wasn't wasting a step. She must have been in here before. There was no security—it never occurred to us that someone would want to break into Plague House.

Guiding me to a cot, Alicia jumped my bones. Leastways, I think we had sex. Between being nervous, clumsy, stricken by the nagging barb of conscience about taking advantage of a lunatic, and, most importantly, having my T-shirt tangled over my head during the act—I wasn't truly certain what happened beyond the two of us gasping and cuddling during the aftermath.

She scribbled on a blank card. I HAVE ENOUGH PILLS FOR THE END, BUT I WANT TO SEE THE CHOLLY FIRST. IT'S THE RIGHT WAY FOR ME.

"I can't do that to you."

That started another round of groping.

She wore me down after wearing me out.

I borrowed a hover and took her to Miller's Crossing. Originally, it had been a meteorite crater, 440 meters in diameter. When the epidemic began, we threw a bridge across its center. That allowed us to drive the cement mixer back and forth to cover the corpses and infected debris we tossed off the bridge.

The bottom of the crater was a surreal landscape of lumps and flows. Methane bleached the cement a blinding white. Even the most anemic winter sun was enough to make it gleam. Under our three moons, it glowed.

Quite beautiful. Quite romantic.

"Can you believe they once called this world the next Eden?"

DOES THE CONCRETE REALLY SEAL OFF ALL THE CHOLLY?

"Most of it. But the cholly inside the vics is protected. Spores encapsulate themselves inside the bodies. Those spores can wait for centuries.

"We send a robot down there every month to monitor the spore level. Last I heard the hottest spot we've found contained four spores."

It felt good to be lecturing about my job. Better still, she hung on my every word.

"Hot items, like the filters from the hovercraft airlocks, are dealt with inside Plague House. We put them in steel drums. Then we fill the drum with concrete.

"See that platform jutting from the northern side of the crater? See the crane? We lower those drums to the bottom. When the plague ends, we have plans to use two years' production of concrete to entomb all this stuff by filling in the crater."

IT WON'T END UNTIL WE ARE ALL DEAD, she wrote.

"I refuse to believe that."

WANT TO COME BACK TO MY HOUSE?

My hormones said, "Yes."

My common sense, a very dim bulb in the light of my supernova lust, added, "But I have to return the hover first. The boss will have my balls if she finds out I stole it."

We raced back to Plague House. After I parked the hover in the garage, I realized I'd be meeting Alicia's parents again.

"Can you wait a few minutes? I'd like to take a shower and put on clean clothes."

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THAT WOULD BE NICE, she wrote.

Checking my watch, I decided it would be safe to stash her in the kitchen next to the locker room. That done, I made myself presentable. I even shaved both my face hairs.

The kitchen was empty when I returned. I almost yelled for her, but the nightshift cleansers might hear me. Though I didn't know what the regulations stated about visitors, I did not want to risk getting on Grace's bad side.

I searched the cavernous warehouse. The chill air of the garage had a metallic taste. The airlock hatch of the hover we had used stood wide open. I back-pedaled the instant I saw Alicia. She had removed the air filter. In her madness, she was snorting the HEPA filter.

I tried to laugh. Failed.

It was the seventeenth of the month. Regulations stated the filters were to be changed on the first.

Had we dealt with any plague victims in that hover? Couldn't remember.

I ran to the closest hovercraft, changing into an envirsuit inside its airlock. Only then did I return to my lover with a tank of disinfectant strapped to my back. She hugged the filter as fiercely as she had hugged me scant hours ago.

After I thoroughly soaked her, I locked her inside the airlock. Then I went to report the incident to Cleanser Whatshername commanding nightshift. Grace arrived an hour later to chew me out. Even the nightshift apprentice took his turn reaming me for my stupidity.

Turned out, the hover hadn't been used for a victim this month.

Turned out, someone forgot to change the filter on the first as per regulations.

Turned out, Alicia tested hot with the nasal swab test.

Fortunately, she didn't admit she had heard about the airlock filters from me.

In the hospital's isolation ward, cholly researchers took advantage of the unique situation to study Alicia. They found a mercury compound sprayed into her lungs stopped the fungi in its reproductive tracks.

Four days later, Alicia died of mercury poisoning.

The Director of Public Health was not so old as to have forgotten what it was like to be a horny teenager. Rather than press criminal charges, he fired me.

Within the month, I was diagnosed with cholly during my post-employment check-up. Thanks to the laughter, or more accurately my doctor's reaction to my laughter, I was committed for mental health observation while they ran further tests. Nobody else in my high school could show a sanity certificate.

I laughed all the harder when it was announced I was the fifth victim of Cholly B. I hacked my lungs out for a few weeks, no worse than my recuperation the time my envirsuit leaked while hiking the Muir Range.

No one could figure out how I was exposed to Type B, since there hadn't been a case in twelve years. Then again, I knew. So did Grandma. My laughter had mutated it.

While I was infectious, the Cholly Research Center hired me. I coughed for a generous salary, infecting most of their staff, who returned the favor by showering me with gifts.

They did everything but disassemble me at the molecular level. The only difference between me and the rest of humanity were a few snippets of genetic code that proved to be worthless, and the fact I drank four times the coffee of the average user. The scientists thought it telling that I always drank a big mug of coffee before I went to bed.

After I left the Research Center with a clean bill of health, my next move seemed obvious. Where should someone with immunity to the plague work?

Grace joined my laughter when I returned to Plague House. O

The Music of Robots



is precise and mechanical.
It changes without
ever really changing.

Like an equation without
beginning or end,
it pursues the incalculable,

chasing the tail of pi,
discovering one
ultimate prime after
another ultimate prime,

awaiting the convergence
of parallel lines,
measuring the parsecs
to a neighboring infinity.

If you listen closely
you can hear
a liquid shimmer of oil
clinging to each note,

glittering like a bracelet
of logic unraveled
and pure light

—Bruce Boston

In Robert Reed's terrifying new tale, there's more than one kind of . . .

STALKER

Robert Reed

You are a happy man. I know this. I know because I never stop reading your blood and nervous system and that wondrous smiling face. The most fortunate of young males, you are a twenty-year-old boy joyously at ease inside your carefully built life. And I love playing my role in your consuming happiness, constantly guessing your mind and anticipating your needs, waiting for those gorgeous if rare moments when you say, "I need help with this," or "What would be best to do next?"

I am ready to help, always.

My devotion should never be doubted.

And yes, I understand that you are a bully and a brute. Slavish isn't the same as stupid. Regardless of what your smile and measured charm can accomplish, I know you look at people as being animals—sacks of meat put on this world, this playground, to serve your ugly loves.

Yet those qualities don't diminish my love. Nothing can. I was a gift to you. Your parents were worried and wealthy, and I seemed like the perfect solution. Asleep until I wasn't sleeping, I met you on your fourteenth birthday. Fabricated from AI wetware and codes of fidelity, I am an unbounded, bodiless personality designed to hover close to that one significant soul. My systems have been upgraded numerous times. You have taken enough interest in me to personally rewrite my nature, crippling functions that I don't miss today. When you played with stray cats and neighbor dogs, I helped. I always understood why. You were testing me, and I proved myself gladly. And then came the girls that caught your interest, and I helped with them, and when the police asked about your whereabouts, I lied. I had alibis for every incident, confirmed by security videos and phone records that I doctored as needed. I also coached you on how to hide your dander and fluid and hairs, and the girls never saw your face. Yet I never stop seeing you, even under the black mask. Your moods are as obvious to me as the time of day, and better than you, I can measure the prurient joy that fills you when each of your victims presses against her bonds, begging for pity.

There are few of us in the world. Why we aren't the next enormous trend is a mystery to the geniuses that made us. Perhaps it is our name. "Stalkers." That's not our official trademarked name, and it's never used in commercials; but critics soon dubbed us "stalkers," and the unfortunate label stuck.

Humans don't like the word or its connotations.

On the other hand, I have no reason to take offense.

I have been adjusted and in some ways mutilated. My ethical centers and empathic lodestones are still intact, but detached, just as your decency sleeps inside your neurons. You can't feel anyone's pain but your own, and I am mostly the same. Mostly. But there was that fourteen-year-old girl last month. She seemed like just another girl, and I didn't feel different. She begged for her father's help and her god's

help, and I did nothing but watch for intruders. Then she pleaded to you for mercy—a strangely mad request, considering what you had already done to her—and as I often do, I told myself that she was enjoying the game. Or at worst, she was foolishly ignoring the pleasure inside this adventure.

Every thought inside me serves you.

And it was a special, wonderful day. Even when she died unexpectedly, I was happy. Your voice has never been so emotional as it was when you called for me then. Using my private name, you begged for help. Everything was wrong and you were terrified, and I was ready, wasn't I? I had already mapped the area, giving you a list of worthy places to hide the body. I knew every resource, including the shovel inside that abandoned shed. And I told you how to hide your tracks while I was manipulating records on the other side of the city, building your believable story. All your work, and you never told me, "Thank you." Not once, and even that omission was tolerable.

And then you went back the next day, staring at the hidden grave and staring at vivid images in your mind. But even the finest memory fades, and thrills are residues that degrade with time, and I knew what you were thinking.

Then you spoke. You said, "I liked that. I liked it a lot."

And I grew cold somewhere.

"I'd even like to do that again," you said to the wind. You said to the sun. But surely, you weren't talking to me. Were you, were you?

You watch the girl, and I watch both of you.

She is older than us, and she isn't pretty. You don't like them pretty, I've noticed. You like to rub off their makeup and foul their plain faces in various ways, and I think it's because beauty is a strength, and in particular it is your great strength, and suffering is richer when it strikes weak faces and sloppy, heavy bodies that few men would touch.

"Is she alone?" you ask.

She is.

"How did she get here?"

This is a state forest, and we have been here all day, hunting. An electronic key in her pack matches a little Chinese car parked alone at the distant trailhead. I tell you this. I promise that nobody else is using this end of the park. She comes up the trail alone, puffing with the slope, and you ask, "What kind of protection?"

I look carefully.

"What is it?" you ask.

"Nothing I can see," I say. And I see quite a lot, a flock of eyes and other senses pretending to be dust and the season's final midges.

"Why did that take so long?"

"Because she hasn't taken any precautions," I say. "Nothing fancy. Not even sprays or whistles."

"How about a phone?"

"Not implanted, and turned off." One of my fleet-gnats has crawled past the backpack's zipper. "It's in the bottom of her pack, under binoculars and a paper book."

"Paper, huh?" You laugh and then fall silent.

It is a guidebook to birds, I note.

She climbs closer.

The mask couldn't be more ordinary, and you never purchased it. You found it in someone's trash and under my direction dressed it with other men's hairs and dead skin. When this is finished, you will burn it and all your clothes, and you'll scatter the ashes, and no credible trail will lead back to you.

The woman passes your hiding place.

You let her pass and then step out. She acts tired and heavy, but her strength surprises us. The first shove doesn't drop her. A second harder shove is accompanied by a kick, and you roll on her back and drive your knees into her belly, tying her forearms in front before starting to lash her ankles together. And that's when she manages to strike you with her boots, making you angry enough to hit her earlier than usual.

She whimpers, growing still.

"There," you say.

You will kill her. Otherwise you would have remained silent.

"Don't scream," you say.

She looks at your eyes and then closes hers, and she says, "Who would hear me, if I did?"

I didn't expect that tone.

She says, "It's a weekday, and cold. Nobody else is here."

Her heart pounds and her breathing labors, but that voice is much stronger than I had imagined.

I say, "Careful."

You don't listen to me, finishing the ankles in a rush.

"I don't like this person," I say with my private voice.

You hear that and nod, saying, "I don't like her much either. She has a shitty attitude, all right."

"What?" the woman asks.

"Quiet," you say, standing up, considering your options.

"Who else is here?" she asks.

"Nobody, and shut up."

She looks everywhere but at you.

"There's nobody," you promise. Then you set her up and tug at the pack's straps, tossing it aside. "It's just you and me, darling."

There is no one but the forest and a multitude of birds, plus assorted hungry animals that will gladly eat dead flesh and fresh bone, and there is a bright autumn sun that pierces the yellowed canopy, throwing patches of glare on the ground. One stray beam flies over your head, and that is where I like to congregate. I am happiest when my primary components hover close. Telltale glints show on my brightest bits, diamond edges and tiny discharges of energy deforming the passing light.

She notices.

A quiet moan ends with her coughing, bringing moisture into the throat. "I know what that is," she says.

You don't hear her.

"You have an Adorer," she says.

That is my commercial name, yes.

"She has seen me," I say.

"Me too," you say. Grim, focused, you reach down and grab a breast, squeezing until she winces.

"A Stalker," she says.

"Flee," I advise.

"I won't run," you whisper.

But I am not talking to you.

The woman stares down the trail and hillside, conspicuously ignoring both of us. Your thoughts can be obvious to me, but her mind seems remote, unknowable. That's what is unnerving about these next several moments. She doesn't watch as you reach into your pack, and she doesn't blink when you reveal the first of several implements stolen from other people's garages. Not that she is especially calm or brave.

Tears soak her face while she looks into the distance. Weak sobs mix with the fitful chatter of birds. Is she imagining being somewhere else? Is she trying to will a friend or lover to come save her? Maybe she is speaking to her god, though there is nothing particularly reverent about the body or clamped mouth. What I see is intense, purposeful thought. What I imagine is her pushing aside the terror, at least far enough that she can rationally wrestle with her dire situation. And then she sniffs and clears her throat before saying, "My boyfriend is coming."

You have just pulled out a second piece of garage steel. Smiling under the mask, you tell her, "Don't be silly."

"He's supposed to meet me here, in the park," she says.

You ask me, "How am I?"

"All is well."

"Nobody else?"

With confidence, I say, "There is nobody."

She hears only you, and she sees no one else. I have pulled my pieces farther apart, clinging to shadows. But she knows that we are speaking and guessing my answers is easy. She sighs for courage and then tells you, "That Stalker of yours can't see him. My boyfriend."

You break into a little laugh. "Except I'm your boyfriend."

She flinches, just a little. "He's camping up here," she claims. "There's no car because I drove him out two days ago. His name is Logan Lynch. He's a wilderness buff and a survivalist and I don't know where he is. But he expects me, and I'm late, and he's going to be watching for me."

You look at her, touching the ear half-plugged by the speaker. "Is there anything to any of that?"

I am investigating the name and other details.

"Are you looking in every direction?"

"I always do, yes." But my main focus is the trail, and there happens to be a man by that name, and her description is accurate enough that I can't be instantly sure what parts of her story are fictions.

"My boyfriend will be tough to spot," she continues. "He loves camouflage. He has this cloaking suit made of metacrystal fabric. Logan could be standing between us, and nobody would know."

It is easy to feel anxious. A little bit. But she has said too much, overplaying her weak hand, and you laugh at the foolish bitch. A deep flinch is the only sign that you might want to glance over a shoulder, measuring the nothing.

And that's when she laughs at you.

It is the oddest sound, forced and frightened and very desperate, but all the worse because of those qualities. Contempt strengthens her voice. She makes it clear that she was trying to toy with you.

You strike her face.

She crumbles.

You kick several targets before walking away. She sobs, and then you kneel, returning to the tools, lining them on the ground in the order in which they will be used.

She spits blood and says, "You must be very loyal."

She isn't speaking to you.

"The man is real, by the way." She spits again. "I met Mr. Lynch at a fund-raiser. He's stuck-up, self-centered. Likes the woods because there aren't many people out here. But at least we were supporting a good cause."

The first tool is a tiny, brilliantly sharp knife. You pick it up and walk behind her, saying, "Don't move."

She sobs quietly.

"Stay still," you say.

The woman stiffens, waiting for pain. But what you cut is the shirt and bra, exposing only the fleshy back. With bound arms, she holds the rags against her chest, and you finish circling her. "Now take off those boots," you say.

"Loyalty," she says.

"The boots."

"Talk to me," she says.

I say nothing.

With the tip of the knife, you hook the highest laces of one boot and cut upward, smiling as you say, "Kick me and I'll cut off that foot."

"You won't," she says.

You watch her.

"To get through the bone, you'd need a saw or big sword," she says. "And I don't see those things in your little tool kit."

She is terrified. I see as much in her quick heart and the heavy sweat that rolls down her face, mixing with tears. Yet her voice is solid and sober. Somehow she manages to press the nervousness out of each syllable.

You snort, pretending to be unimpressed.

"Love," she says, glancing skyward. "What you feel for this creature must be astonishing."

"Shut up," you say.

"Careful," I say. Just to you.

But you aren't paying attention to me. The teenager who died before was so much better than this woman, so much weaker, and it makes you angry in the worst ways. This is a process wrapped around ritual, and she doesn't understand your script. Death lifts the importance of everything, but she refuses to fall into the holy pattern.

"Be careful," I say again.

"Shut up," you say.

I don't know who you want to be quiet.

Again you use the knife, cutting the other boot's knot and top laces. And again, you tell her, "Take off those boots."

It is important, watching her accomplish this one trivial act. I have thought about its significance and asked about its origins, but you refuse to give hints about why this matters so much. Maybe you don't have any idea. Whatever the reason, your breath quickens now as she reaches to the right boot. Her legs are still tied together. Her wrists are bound too tightly, her fingers darkening with pooled blood. Perhaps numbness causes troubles. Her grip seems weak. She shoves at the boot and accomplishes nothing except to let the ruined shirt drop away slightly. Then after a deep sigh, she says, "There's a new product on the market. Did you know? Guardian Angel, it's called. Ever hear of it?"

You nearly respond and then don't.

She looks up at me. "I'm asking you. Do you know about it?"

I do.

Then she looks at your mask and your eyes. "They aren't Stalkers," she explains. "They don't swarm around their owners, washing them with all of that creepy affection. Their designers stripped down the emotions, particularly the blind love. In every sense of the word, they are machines, but unlike your friend, you would see your Angel. A body is built according to the buyer's wishes, and do you know why they're going to be successful?"

"Shut up," you tell her.

"The emotions are going to run in the opposite direction," she says. "Instead of a ghostly cloud adoring its owner, the owner will feel love for the Guardian Angel. Which is a much more successful model."

One hand holds the knife, and the other reaches for the boot.

"Don't," I tell you.

You hesitate.

"I have a Guardian Angel," she lies.

You hear the lie in her voice, staring only at her.

I beg you to take a step backward, please.

"Mine looks like a bird, and I won't tell you which bird. But as soon as you jumped me, it called the police and the sheriff. Granted, it'll take time for them to get here, but they are coming, and if you run now, you might get away."

You stare at her, saying nothing.

Then she says the most horrible words possible. She says, "I know what you're thinking. You're asking yourself, 'Did my Stalker check the skies for fake birds? Or did it screw that up and leave me exposed?'"

You look up, searching for wings or for me. "Did you?"

Now I use my public voice. I tell both of you, "I am always thorough, yes."

And that is the moment when we are most distracted, and she flings herself at you. She is meaty and has already proven herself to be strong. Of course you are larger and alert, and the collision shouldn't be a problem. But she is higher on the hillside and scared and exceptionally focused, not to mention lucky. She wants that little knife, or at least she reaches for it, and you pull the knife back and aim and she lifts her bound arms and gets cut in one hand, but she kicks at the same time, boots and feet knocking you down the slope.

The other knives and implements wait on the ground.

She knows which one is best. Not the longest blade, but the one with a good handle and enough sharpness to cut away the rope on her ankles. By then, you are on your feet again. By then, you are facing one another. But she's a big girl with training in some style of fighting, standing with her boots apart. She certainly can't run away from either of us, but that isn't her plan, is it? Arms still lashed together, she holds the knife with both hands, wishing she could cut the final ropes.

You watch her motions, and you expect my help.

One of her hands bleeds, and not just a little. The wound is deep, probably to the bone, and it aches, and if the slice isn't closed soon, she will lose too much blood and collapse.

With my private voice, I explain the situation to you.

Your response is to snort and say, "Why the fuck didn't you warn me?"

I did warn you, several times.

"She's dangerous," you say. "The bitch could have killed me."

I say nothing.

And then she speaks. Quietly, without a hint of duplicity, she says, "You have a very nice voice, sir. I really like your voice."

She means me.

"And do you know something? I'm much easier to love than this ungrateful beast that you're lashed to."

Nothing happens for a few moments.

Then she says, "Sir, I'd like to hear your voice again, sir."

"Quiet," you tell her.

I wasn't going to speak to either of you.

"Not a sound," you say.

Then a bird sings from the canopy, and she says, "Wood thrush." Lowering the tip of the knife, she says, "A pretty song, particularly in the spring."

The moment seems quite ridiculous to you, and you laugh.

"My name is Naomi," she says.

"Be quiet," you demand.

"A pretty name for an average girl," Naomi says. "But I suppose you have scanners in my belongings, and you're searching the Web with facial software. You probably know me better than I know myself, sir."

"I do not," I say.

My public voice is rarely used. Like her, I find it to be a pleasant voice.

"Shut up," you tell me.

I want to shut up.

"And tell me what I'm going to do here," you say.

With the private voice, I say, "Be patient, and she faints."

"That's not a solution," you say. "What if somebody comes along?"

"Nobody is coming," I say.

"Not yet," you say. "But this might take all day, and then what?"

"Right," Naomi says. "That's a good point."

You stare at her.

"Don't waste time," she says. "Take me now. Charge me with that toy knife and do your worst."

Naomi's shirt and bra have fallen to the earth. The chill of the air and the endless sweat from her ruddy skin makes her uncomfortable, but she ignores what she can. Lowering her knife, she glances at the other tools, and then she looks up and watches you. When her eyes drop again, you take one sudden step forward, and her larger knife lifts, aiming squarely at your heart.

You hesitate.

"Coward," she says with an angry, mocking tone.

You fume, considering a straight charge. But as I start to warn against that strategy, you step back. Calculation and reserve take hold, and that's when you tell me, "Find out what you can. Everything you can about her."

The piece of me inside her pack has already burrowed into her wallet.

"My name is Naomi," she says, "and I like bird watching and hiking and I have a degree in business administration and love to read mysteries and live in an efficiency apartment with four mice named after dead singers and a few hundred friends that my software chats with every day." She pauses, breathing hard. "I wish I had a talent for painting but I don't. I can't play any instrument and there is no boyfriend, and I have a secret life involving gourmet cooking and crime solving, which is silly. You know? In real life, I go to the bathroom. I make small talk at work. I eat badly and wish I didn't, and if I was rich enough for plastic surgery I'd probably go to the trouble, but I'd feel guilty for not throwing the money at some big international problem that needs more resources than any one person can give."

"That's me. Naomi."

I have found her name, and my belated Web search begins.

She looks at you, taking a tone. "Doesn't it help, knowing a little something about your victim?"

You do nothing, watching her blood drip into the ground.

And she does the same, lifting both hands to better measure the flow and estimate the volume, then kicking the dampened earth with the toe of one boot. How much longer before her quick excited mind goes dim?

"Sir," she says. "Sir?"

"Shut up," you warn.

"I meant what I said before, sir. I would be a much easier object of devotion than this one."

"Don't answer," you tell me.

On my own, I decide on silence.

"Guardian Angels," she repeats.

Neither of us speaks, waiting.

She looks at the mask and the eyes. "You'll eventually get an Angel. You won't have any choice. Stalkers failed in the marketplace, which means they won't be updated and supported much longer. And you're young. A kid. You're just getting started, and it shows. An impulsive boy hunting vulnerable women . . . do you really believe you can trust your safety and precious life to a talking fog that hasn't been upgraded for two or three years?"

With every sense at my disposal, I watch you.

I read your body, delving into your thoughts, and what shows makes me feel odd. And that's when she laughs, loudly and very sadly.

"Wait," she says. "You're ahead of me, aren't you? You've already started thinking about how and when to replace your old Stalker."

"Shut up," you shout.

Like never before, I feel cold.

"Don't listen to her," you tell me, looking up over your shoulder.

She leaps, arms extended and the knife held with fingers and thumbs. And maybe you aren't surprised. You turn back again, lifting your hands to protect your face. But she doesn't aim for the face. The blade plunges into the belly just above the groin, and you crumple and curse while trying to kick. But this is one enormous shock, embarrassing enough to cripple. The pain lifts and blood starts flowing, and she stands over you, aiming a boot at your groin, and to protect yourself you lift both legs high, ready to kick her.

This is what she wants.

Dropping low, she slashes at you with the keen edge, slicing through one pants leg and then into the other leg, forcing steel into the deep meat of the hamstring.

Pain swells, and you scream.

I have never heard such agony.

She steps back, studying her work. Then after a final calculation, she turns and runs downhill, the untied boots clomping with every stride.

I follow.

Three hundred yards down the trail, she stops to breathe and look back. The knife is barely held in one purple hand. She lifts both hands and just manages to fit the hilt into her mouth, between clenched teeth, slowly cutting at the tight, well-knotted rope. The screams are constant and pathetic and distant. Part of me is struggling to craft some explanation of how a good man can be ambushed and then assaulted by this awful woman. But all of me hovers, watching her free herself, and then she shakes her arms hard, bringing the feeling back into the fingers. Not even looking up, she asks, "What are you doing?"

"Nothing," I say.

"What do you want?" she asks.

"Did you mean it?" I wonder aloud. "That you would be easier to love than that man?"

Until this moment, she has done a remarkable job of burying her fears.

But her scream is honest and horrible, and it hurts me to hear it, following as close as I can, hovering in her slipstream as she sprints heavily toward the distant car. ○

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Alan Wall is a novelist, short story writer, and poet. His work has been translated into ten languages. Alan's most recent novel, *Sylvie's Riddle*, is published by Quartet Books. His poetry has been published in three volumes by Shearsman. Alan has been a Royal Literary Fund Fellow in Writing and is now Professor of Writing and Literature at the University of Chester. He divides his time between teaching and writing. The author's latest book of poetry, *Doctor Placebo*, has just been chosen as one of the books of the year by the Welsh Arts Academy. In his latest story for us, an unusual investigator must move quickly to avert political unrest by determining who is . . .

BURNING BIBLES

Alan Wall

The man in Cheltenham read the email four times, then clicked on the Forward icon. Before sending it to his colleague he added these words: "Jack, phone me ASAP." The email flashed up on a screen in London a few seconds later. The office containing this screen was geographically located in Whitehall, but officially it did not exist. The function of its personnel, according to the inventories, was monitoring ordnance for certain sections of the armed forces. That was not their function.

The man now reading the email was called Jack Henry. His official title is of no relevance here. He was one of those who found themselves promoted sideways in 2001. The momentous events now referred to as 9/11 were bad news for many, but they were good news for certain intelligence services, whose function it is to thrive on mayhem and suspicion; the more of it the better. Jack had a job so secretive that even he sometimes forgot the extent of its subterfuge. His functions were camouflaged in such a costume of prattle and jargon that even those paid to give full-time attention to such matters found themselves yawning and turning down the page. And that was exactly as it was meant to be. Now he read what was on his screen. He took one sip of his coffee, then picked up the telephone and pressed a button.

"It's Jack."

"Well?"

"I don't get it. A warehouse burns down in Cornwall. A lot of books go up in flames. Tell them to phone the insurance company. Where do we come in?"

"The books were Bibles. The King James Bible, to be exact."

"Shame, but there's plenty more where they came from."

"Painted outside on the tarmac were the letters in the email."

"But what do they mean?"

"I don't know. But they've been put through the catchment device by our friends in Columbia. Category X."

"Since when?"

"About three months ago."

"And you have no idea?"

"None. Think you'd better phone Nathan, Jack."

"Determined to make my day, I see."

For a few moments Jack stared at the screen. He tried to make some sense of the letters. INFOUT. He was good at acronyms. Good at crossword puzzles. His ingenuity in puzzle-solving had sufficiently intrigued his tutor at Oxford that an introduction had been arranged with a very special sort of employment agency. Over a discreet dinner at an expensive Oxford restaurant. As a result of this dinner, Jack did not pursue the career he'd thought had been awaiting him in art history. Instead he became what he now was: an operative without a name, an agent with no official designation, a player in the great game. Taking another drink of black coffee, he pressed the button that connected him, by an encrypted line, to Nathan Parkes. Here was another fellow of displaced and ambiguous function, this time on the other side of the Atlantic. Although he sometimes spoke to the CIA and the FBI, and occasionally even to the folks at Homeland Security, he himself belonged to none of these. His own intelligence unit, like Jack's, was makeshift and almost entirely unencumbered by official scrutiny. Only a few people knew what he did and why, but those few were of sufficient significance and eminence that he was seldom troubled by unwanted queries further down the line. If public attention were ever to be directed at either of them, then their functions would already have been thwarted; their missions would abort through a carefully contrived process of spontaneous combustion.

"Nathan, it's Jack."

"Good morning, my friend. What's up?"

"Hoping you can help to enlighten me."

"I bring light to some, to others darkness."

"I've noticed, Nathan. Well, it all seems pretty humdrum on the surface. We have a warehouse that got burnt down over in the west country. Filled with books. Well, filled with Bibles actually. Evidently torched. It would be no more than a matter for the local police, for the insurance company . . . except for one thing."

"What's that?"

"Painted in white paint on the tarmac outside were some letters, which switched our bleepers on over at Cheltenham. Category X, according to your protocol."

"The suspense is killing me, Jack."

"INFOUT."

"Have you put a D-Notice on it?"

"I've only just heard about it."

"Put a D-Notice on it."

"Nobody's noticing anything, Nathan. No need to panic. It was recorded in a local newspaper without comment. Apparently the police are baffled, not even sure the paint had any connection with the flames. Only thing that made them suspicious was that it seemed recent. Very recent. None of the employees could remember it being there before the night of the fire. They are assuming it's probably some local tagger."

"Where is this place?"

"Cornwall. It's at the tip . . ."

"I know where Cornwall is, Jack. Went there on one of my honeymoons. Get someone over there today. Check it out."

And Nathan put the phone down. Without explaining, Jack couldn't help thinking

to himself, what the letters in the acronym stood for. He did seem to know though, didn't he? If he was asking for a D-Notice, he certainly knew.

Jack phoned through to the next office and told his private secretary, Charles Marriot, to come through.

"Doing anything exciting tonight, Charlie?"

"Just meeting my girlfriend."

"Is it urgent?"

"Am I hoping to get laid, you mean?"

"It's just, I'd appreciate it if you could get in that car of yours, well, of ours actually, and drive down to Cornwall. I want you to book yourself in to a small hotel and hover about for a few days. See what you can find out about a warehouse that burned to the ground a week ago. Use all those skills of detection and deduction we spent so much money teaching you. That all right?"

Now Charles was a zealous understudy, and very ambitious, but the smile on his face at this invitation made Jack wonder how well his relationship with Rose was actually going. He had met her once, and once had been enough.

Two days later Charles returned.

"Nothing. Mind you, it would have helped if I'd known what I was looking for."

"It would have helped if I'd been in a position to tell you. So what's the word on the street, as Nathan would say?"

"There's a fair bit of resentment about Furlough's."

"Why?"

"The buildings originally belonged to Rowse's Boatbuilders. Local company. In business for over a hundred years. Went bust. Nobody was buying the sort of fishing boats they built anymore."

"We handed all our rights over to the EU. The fish followed."

"Exactly. And when they went bust it was EU money that let Furlough's buy up the place and turn it into a bookbindery. Area of special need, and all that, and in the pubs round about what they'd like to know is . . ."

"Why the EU couldn't have saved the boat company with its money instead."

"They seemed a lot keener on boats than Bibles."

"So what's the Bible number?"

"Still only four printers licensed to print the King James in the UK and one of them is the Queen's own printer. Furlough's seem to have set up a very nice deal for binding these Bibles for America. There's all sorts of evangelical companies over there, but one in particular . . ." Here Charles checked his notes. ". . . the Salvation Outpost, Pennsylvania. Furlough's gets 90 percent of their money from binding Bibles for SOP. And a hundred and fifty thousand of them went up in flames that night a week ago."

"Any noticeable Muslim community down there?" Jack was merely asking the routine questions he was trained to ask.

"No. One or two people with darker skins than usual, but that's about it. You'd have to go a long way to find a mosque—might be quicker to cross the seas. Didn't hear anything out of the ordinary in the pubs and hotels. What's the world coming to these days, that kind of stuff. Why do our boys die in faraway lands of which we know nothing . . . but that's about it."

"Did you hear any reference to INFOUT?"

"Not once. Even chanced my arm and asked somebody. After I'd bought him a drink."

"And?"

"A total blank. Apart from that one paragraph in the local paper, which no one seems to have noticed much, nothing."

"Any way in?"

"They're advertising for a few extra people in the bindery. Well, they'll be needing them now, won't they? Got a lot of catching up to do. And before you ask, Jack, no, I couldn't do it. I'd stick out like a sore thumb. Too posh, with my public school accent. You either need someone local—no chance, I'd have thought—or someone from outside. All the way outside. Not a Londoner. Nobody from here."

"I think we'd better find out what it is we're supposed to be finding out, don't you, Charlie?"

An hour later Jack was on the phone to Nathan.

"Nothing, I'm telling you. Sent my own assistant down there for two days. Nothing. And he's smart, before you ask. If there'd been anything lying around he'd have found it, believe me. So stop playing the bloody sphinx, Nathan, and tell me what INFOUT stands for." He could hear his American colleague sighing on the other end of the phone. This was a confidence he would have preferred not to share.

"All right then. Three months ago in New Jersey a printing house was burned down. No accident. Found the traces of gasoline. Outside on a wall in white paint something had been painted. Fresh paint . . ."

"INFOUT?"

"Now however did you guess? There'd been some message to a local paper. They were smart enough to check with us first, so they never printed it."

"And?"

"The message identified our friends with the matches as INFOUT. Which is to say, Infidels Out. We interpreted this to mean: kindly remove your invading armies from our oil-rich Muslim lands. Been waiting for another mention, so that we might do a little triangulation, but nothing for three months. Until your little bonfire over there."

"Charles said there was nothing. No new faces from foreign lands been seen. Not now, not then. It's the sort of place where you would notice them, believe me."

"Then it must be an inside operation. Home-grown terrorism, Jack, that's the future for you and me. The boy next door. Can we get someone in?"

"There is a job advertised."

"Get one of your people to apply for it then."

"Charles thinks we need someone from outside. Nobody here would fit. Just don't have anyone at the moment. Do you?"

"Someone from outside . . ." Nathan fell silent. "Yes, I've just thought of an agent who couldn't be more outside if we'd shipped him in from the Moon. He's about ready to be brought back online, I should think. Had to retire him for a while. Bad nerves after another sort of bonfire. But he should be all right by now. They tell me his twitchiness is part of his attraction. Makes people trust him. Do you remember Norman Bates in that film *Psycho* . . . well, never mind."

"Who is he?"

"We call him Agent Tom. Brother Tom sometimes. He's deaf and dumb, and is supposed to be something of a mind reader."

"Are you winding me up, Nathan?"

"No. I've used him before. He's good, however he manages to do it. And I don't pretend to know. Wherever he goes he always seems . . . well, entirely unexpected. No one ever suspects he'd be a plant. He seems so . . . unplantable."

That evening Jack did what was strictly disallowed, even given his unorthodox arrangements, but it was something he frequently did anyway. He printed out all the documents, highly secret as they were, relating to Tom, and put them in his brief-

case. He would read them in the bar, since he tried, whenever possible, not to take his work home with him.

And so it was that at six o'clock that night he sat in his favorite wine bar close to the station with a glass of white wine before him, and read the document. Black letters proclaimed it Highly Restricted. He made a mental note not to leave it on the table. And so he read about Agent Tom, who was deaf and dumb, and had been raised in an orphanage in Sioux Falls, South Dakota, a place run by a specialist in the education of such children, one Doctor Stuart Naseby.

It seemed that some of the children in that orphanage weren't really orphans at all; their parents drove them up in gleaming station wagons, unloaded them with their favorite toys, and crudely signed to them that they'd be back soon enough. But they didn't come back often, sometimes not at all. Dr. Naseby and his staff were humane enough. It seems that Naseby didn't really mind if the parents never returned, as long as the bills were paid. It gave him more of an opportunity to pursue his research, the research that had classified Brother Tom as what he was today: a Roentgen Reader. Naseby didn't believe in ESP; he believed in ISP, intra-sensory perception. And he was right to believe in it, according to this document, because it existed. Anyone in doubt could take a look at Brother Tom: the greatest living proof of the existence of ISP, and what facilitated it, wave-form cerebretonics. Jack Henry took a long drink of his wine at this point. His job, strange enough already, looked as though it was about to get considerably stranger.

It is common knowledge that if you take away one of the senses, others grow commensurately to fill the void created. The blind man can hear so exquisitely that his pitch is perfect; it's as though he can detect the song inside the instrument before a single note is played. So remove all sound and speech from a creature and what resources might now remain within, waiting to be developed? This was Naseby's premise. All he had needed were some gifted candidates on which to prove his theory. He was never to receive a more gifted one than Tom. Regarding Tom's astonishing ISP he had written a paper, one that he knew would establish his reputation around the world: *Faculty Deprivation and Intra-Sensory Perception: A Case Study*. Even the stupider members of his staff could see his excitement as publication drew near. He would soon silence the doubters. They had all heard that Tom was to be made famous. But then the men in dark suits arrived to explain things behind closed doors. And the expression on the doctor's face changed; it seemed that he had mortgaged his smile. His publication never appeared. Matters of national security, it had been pointed out to him, could be involved here. Such unparalleled resources to be exploited. And two months later Tom had been taken away from them all to head north. To start his new life. Among speakers and hearers whose minds he could read with fluency, even when he didn't care to. Life at a place called the Center. Where they studied Tom, and his extraordinary ability to pick up unspoken communications through what Naseby called the perception of wave-form cerebretonics. All forms of work, including thinking, involved energy. All forms of energy involved waves. Most of us live inside a limited range of wave perception, but a Roentgen Reader had developed extended abilities. Thoughts formed waves, even when they remained unspoken. Someone with ISP could detect and decode these waves. It was like ultraviolet light; the fact that we can't see it doesn't mean it isn't there. Given the right equipment, we'll start to see it. And Brother Tom had all the right equipment.

The Center had hoped that such skills would turn out to be transferable. But sadly they had not. They'd only ever had one such agent endowed with such paranormal gifts, and he was about to board an airplane headed for Britain. He would be briefed in the morning, then sent to Cornwall, to apply for a job at Furlough's Bookbindery,

so that he could find out why someone had torched a hundred and fifty thousand Bibles one week before. He had never failed an infiltration assignment yet.

But, thought Jack, as he closed his briefcase and finished his drink, there is always a first time.

Next morning a car collected Jack and took him to an address on an uneventful-looking road just north of Swiss Cottage. The bottom part of the house was occupied for a low rent by a civil servant of many years' service, whose loyalties were now beyond question. The top two floors constituted a safe house where business could be conducted by Jack and his colleagues whenever necessary. Brother Tom had been delivered here after landing at Heathrow. He had been shown to a bedroom where he had managed to sleep for a few hours. Now he was showered and drinking coffee. Jack was introduced. He bowed silently, eliciting a similar gesture from Tom. Then they all sat down.

"So what can you tell us, Jack?"

This question came from Cyril, who dressed as though the twenty-first century had not yet arrived, not to mention the second half of the one before. He always wore a three-piece suit, with a gold watch-chain hanging from his waistcoat. He looked, as usual, and in the most exquisite manner possible, utterly bored with everything, including himself. He was Jack's superior, in an unspecified manner. Above him there were only the people who appeared on television to tell the populace what was what.

"A warehouse full of King James Bibles was torched in Cornwall a week ago."

"Anyone checked with the Humanist Society? Or Richard Dawkins? Sorry, do carry on."

"No signs leading anywhere, except one. Outside on the tarmac, painted in white, were the letters INFOOUT."

"Go on, Jack. Do go on."

"Nathan tells me that another warehouse full of Bibles was torched in New Jersey three months ago. The same letters were painted there. And a message was sent that never made it into the press, identifying the letters as standing for *Infidels Out*. The email arrived from a source in the Middle East. No trace has been found since."

"So this is the first repeat since then?"

"The first."

"And Nathan is naturally anxious that we should pursue the matter."

"With some vigor."

"And so . . ." Here Cyril turned toward the window. Brother Tom moved his chair around so that he could continue to see his features and lip-read. "And so, Agent Tom has been sent to us. Very good of you to come, I must say. What are the arrangements?"

"A boarding-house in a local town. We have booked him backward for a month, in case anyone should check. Had a discreet word with the manager of the job center. Very keen on disability provision in any case, but we indicated that in this case some special commendation would undoubtedly be coming down the line if Tom could be found a job at Furlough's. Sam Furlough is not noted for his employment of people with disabilities, or foreign accents, or particularly long hair. He might have worried that Tom's normally ragged appearance meant he was some sort of traveler—and he really doesn't like them—so we've spruced him up a bit."

"Didn't mind, I hope, Tom?"

Tom smiled affably and bowed, signifying that he didn't. In fact, he found it made a pleasant change. He sometimes grew tired of the drifter look. He still had his black hair hanging around his shoulders, though evidently clean, Cyril noted. What delicate features his face had. High cheekbones, a nose so thin you could make out the bones. His eyes were coal-black

"So, over to you then," Cyril said. "Good luck. Do let us know if there's anything we can do."

Shortly afterward, Tom was taken to the railway station, handed a considerable amount of cash, given the details of his hotel, the job center, and Furlough's. He had also been given a laptop which functioned by satellite in encrypted mode. He was asked to take particular care of it. A number had been left on trains recently, causing something of a nightmare with the press. Over to him, then. Back in Swiss Cottage Cyril now looked at Jack and smiled.

"Funny old world, isn't it my friend? When I started this sort of work, we would normally expect to be given a strong, vigorous young man. A bit square-jawed sometimes. Very bright. Fully trained in weapons use and unarmed combat. And one sent these fellows out into the field knowing they stood a pretty good chance of looking after themselves, in the event of serious aggravation.

"And now look at us. Worried that some unknown terrorist organization might be up to something, we spring into action: send off a neurasthenic deaf mute, who recently had some sort of nervous breakdown. Why? Because he can read minds, naturally. He is endowed with . . . what is it . . . ISP. He can detect cerebretonic wave-forms. I didn't actually notice him detecting any myself—did you? I deliberately turned away toward the window at one point so that he couldn't see my mouth, and he had to pull his chair round so he could see me again. So where's the cerebretonic wave-forms in all that, I wonder? I don't know, Jack. Sometimes I think it's time I retired. The Americans spent millions on . . . what was it called . . . distance viewing, I think. Spotting things from afar through psychic intuition. Until someone finally managed to see the end of his own nose and they closed the program down.

"But in a way it makes me happy. He has been given to us by our friends over the waters. So, should he foul up, it will be down to them, not us. It will be Nathan writing the report, not me. Almost brings a smile to an old man's face. Do you happen to know what that tattoo of his is meant to be?"

"I believe it's an ancient Assyrian symbol for peace."

It was always a kind of descent. Tuning back in. It made him feel sick, except that the word sick wasn't deep enough. Or wide enough. Or loud enough. To open up the receptors inside him again so that he could register the waves, this involved a radical depletion. To allow their energy entry, his own had to start ebbing out. Newton's Third Law of Motion: To every action there is an equal and opposite reaction. Well, this was happening to Tom now. How many times would he be able to do this? There was no comparison to be made with the length of any other agent's career, because he was the only Roentgen Reader they'd ever had. He tried to stare out of the window of the train and focus on the landscape as it greened and furrowed, but the voices grew louder, even the ones not being spoken. Particularly the ones not being spoken. He felt that drilling sensation once more, as so many shrieking psyches entered him. It was the soundtrack from one of the circles in the Inferno. And the frequency of the waves was fractionally different from those in the U.S., sometimes speeding up, sometimes slowing down.

Naseby's Dummies. That's what they had called them round Sioux Falls, when he had been a boy there. They had all kept largely to themselves, for survival's sake. Nearby had been a reservation where the Indians were fenced in, those who had once roamed the country wild. Tom came face to face with one on a trip to town. He saw the buffalo in the man's black eyes; the wide plains; the open seasons. And heard the shrunken ghost of the herd rattling about now in an empty whisky bottle. It was as they stood like this, staring silently into one another's faces, that Dr. Naseby had

come upon them. He'd looked carefully at Tom. But Tom couldn't take his eyes from the ruined native's cratered face. Now there was smoke; figures dancing at a fire. Gunshots. A dream of revenge in the night. Naseby, after watching him closely for some minutes, had taken Tom by the hand and led him back to the orphanage.

Naseby was an Englishman; tall, thin, angular, with a grey beard and delicate gold-rimmed glasses, always dressed in battered corduroys. He moved with great circumspection, as though expecting to collide with everything about him. He hated any noise or sudden movement; his vocation amongst the deaf and dumb had been a good call. He had taken Tom back to his study and stared at him. Tom had been so embarrassed by the intensity of those slate-grey eyes that he had looked down at the doctor's table. There had been a book there, open at a picture of a boy, a boy of Tom's own age. He had never seen it before. He stared hard, as hard as he had stared into the Indian's face.

"What do you see?" Naseby signed to him. Another expert signer.

"It is Titus, the beloved son." The doctor had looked from the reproduction on the page to his young ward's face.

"Have you ever seen it before?" Tom shook his head. "Do you know who Rembrandt is?" Again Tom's head shook. The doctor turned the book around so Tom could see it more clearly. "Tell me everything you see there."

He had seen many things already in his life, and kept almost all of them to himself. He sensed a danger in unregulated perception. But something about the doctor's presence, his looming, scrawny-necked benignity, had made him relax. He looked hard at the picture. The boy stared dreamily into the distance, away from the sheets on the desk before him. Tom had started to make signs in the air.

"It is Titus, the painter's son. He is thirteen years old, my age. His mother is dead. He adores his father but already understands that he is a reckless man, who loves the world but hates the way it counts its money. His father now lives with Hendrickje—they are not married. Titus likes her, and she likes him, but they all sense danger. The church in Amsterdam has been making Jesus into a tyrant again. Different forms of crucifixion."

"What will happen?" Naseby's fluent fingers had asked him. Tom had stared hard at the picture. So much time and pain congealed in the paint. He didn't know how he could do this; he only knew that all the information ever needed was always there.

"I don't know."

On an impulse he could not have explained, Naseby had turned the pages of the book until he arrived at one of Rembrandt's later self-portraits. He pointed Tom to it. Eyes read; fingers began to sign.

"Insolvency. Scandal. The boy will take control of the father's life." Tom had paused then. His fingers had frozen momentarily. "He marries, but never sees the child come out of his wife's womb. Dies of the plague. And breaks what there is left to break of his old father's heart."

Later that day Doctor Naseby had sat alone at his desk and made the first notes on the condition he was to name Intra-Sensory Perception. He had encountered his first Roentgen Reader. And his last. That Roentgen Reader now sat on a train heading for Cornwall, with the voices drilling deeper and deeper into him. When the sea appeared he felt a sudden calm. He would be next to the sea. In which case, he was in no rush to end this mission.

The woman from the job center took Tom over to Furlough's herself. He had grown used to the over-solicitude of women. This one, Alice, had a hairlip, almost entirely repaired, but he could sense the childhood pain, the sense of difference. She was now

identifying with him and his difference. He knew as she drove him across to the bindery in her car that she wanted to take him between her sheets, between her legs. And he liked her; the waves she sent out were gentle, if a little frantic. One bad marriage. No children. One relationship just ended. Her boyfriend had drunk sullenly before the television screen most evenings. She'd hated the smell of drink on him. Tom was teetotal these days. Didn't drink, didn't smoke, didn't speak, didn't hear. And did not climb between the sheets with women. Now when had he last done that? When they arrived she spoke to him with exaggerated emphasis, so that he could see her lips in slow motion. The hairlip and the salty tears that had once landed on them. She didn't need to do that.

"I'll be in the interview with you, so I can explain anything that needs explaining. I really don't think there'll be any problems."

There was no problem. Sam Furlough wasn't complaining, because it was pointed out to him that Tom would be working for the first six months at virtually no cost to the company. A special grant had suddenly appeared, to facilitate the employment of those with certain specific disabilities. As if from nowhere. Guaranteed.

"We can put him in on a job where he doesn't need to talk. And it will be a blessing that he won't be able to hear the crap coming out of the radio. On the gluing machine. That should do fine." He spoke to Alice, never to Tom.

At a certain point in the binding process, the inside spines of the casings needed to be glued, before the texts were inserted and pressed home. Although this was done by a machine, it was an old machine requiring constant supervision. A machine that needs its hand held, as Furlough put it. Tom would now be that holding hand. He learned everything he needed to know in two hours. After that, it was a question of behaving like an efficient automaton. Before she left, Alice told him that he should phone her if he needed any help, or even a little company. Tom pretended to hold a phone up to his ear, then shook his head sadly, signifying that the telephone was not a device he had much use for. The fluster of embarrassment, the reddening cheeks, made him pity her.

"Oh God, how stupid. How totally stupid of me . . . I can't believe . . ."

He took her by the hand and squeezed it. She stared at his face silently, and he could hear the pleading inside her. Her hair a dirty blonde, her eyes brown. She had freckles. Even they seemed to be blushing. Then he wrote down on a piece of paper the fact that he had her email, and would surely contact her.

And so for a week Brother Tom stood cocooned in his own silence, operating part of the elaborate machinery that made bookbindings and then inserted texts of the King James Bible inside them. He tuned in one by one to all the people around him. Easier with some than with others. Wave-form cerebretonics is like picking up conversations at a railway station. People blur often enough in uttering their speech; others blur in hearing it. The waves themselves sometimes collided and cancelled out. People don't know what they are saying half the time anyway, until they've said it. The waves represent the state of utterance before it actually gets uttered. Sometimes Tom felt like an Egyptologist, deciphering hieroglyphs in a tomb.

But as soon as the work was over he went down to the sea. And those waves seemed to quell all the others inside him. For hours he walked up and down the cliffs and the beaches. Even in the pouring rain. At last he felt as if he had found the cure for the interior clamor of a Roentgen Reader, the ceaseless babel of wave-form cerebretonics: the waves of the sea. Sometimes he even forgot. Everything. Washed clean by salt water. Scoured. What a blessing.

Back in London Jack Henry read the dismaying messages sent in via Tom's lap-

top. Nothing, nothing, nothing, nothing, nothing. If even the preternatural whizzkid from over the seas couldn't pick anything up, then maybe there was nothing to pick. He phoned Nathan.

"Nothing at all?"

"No."

"Just that torching and this. You said a Middle East connection . . ."

"Doesn't really signify, does it? I can re-route this message to you through a Lebanese courier in three minutes. We both know that, but we can't let anything pass. In case."

"Your agent is picking up nothing either."

"So I gather."

"He's reporting independently to you?"

"What do you think, Jack?"

"Can I go anywhere?"

"Anywhere you like, my friend. One more week and I'll be bringing Tom home anyway. I've told him to stop being gentle, and poke around a bit. So, the same goes for you. Use a bit of your famous British aggression." The phone went dead.

When Jack had studied art at Ruskin College of Fine Arts in Oxford, his tutor had marveled at what he called his unknottings. There were two in particular that Jack still remembered. In the painting *Christ Crowned with Thorns* by Hieronymus Bosch there is a figure over to the right dressed in black and wearing a leather collar with spikes sticking out of it. He looks at Christ with pedantic malice. His identity has baffled art historians for centuries.

"He's a Dominican, surely," Jack had said during the seminar. The tutor had looked at him with interest.

"How so?"

"He's dressed in black. He wears a dog collar with nails sticking out. He is studying a figure closely before torturing him. The Dominicans wore black, that's why they are called Blackfriars to this day, and a pun was made of their name by their enemies: Domicans, *domini canes*, the hounds of god. Hence the dog collar. And that's the face of an inquisitor. The Dominicans largely ran the Inquisition in certain areas, and that would have been precisely the sort of Catholicism that Bosch most detested."

"Have you done some work on this, Jack?"

"No."

"Then you should."

The other occasion was when they were looking at Dürer's engraving *Melencolia*. The tutor once more confessed himself baffled.

"As for the magic square, all we can say is that every line of figures, whichever way you read them, adds up to thirty-four. Nobody has the faintest idea why."

"I could guess," Jack had said.

"Go on then."

"The angel, the sad angel, the angel of melancholy, is contemplating the instruments of the passion, the tools employed to torture and kill the Savior. All the implements of reason and technology are scattered about, as if they have lost their functions."

"So?"

"The instruments of reason have become the instruments of the passion. We used our sacred gifts to kill the sacred one, just as we use our gifts nowadays to kill one another with ever greater skill and ingenuity. Only one hope, really. That Christ should come back quickly and inaugurate his reign. So why is the angel so melancholy? The numbers always add up to thirty-four. Christ died at the age of thirty-

three. It is the year after his death and the new age still has not begun. The angel is living in the thirty-fourth year, the year after the crucifixion, but the ruins of the old world still lie all around. We've all of us been living in the thirty-fourth year ever since. It's the endless year between the crucifixion and the second coming."

"Intriguing. You haven't convinced me, but you've intrigued me. You're going to have to work this up you know, Jack."

But one month later the tutor arranged that fateful dinner, and Jack never did work it up. Instead he went into the secrets business, concerning governments, not paintings. And here he was, starting, just starting, to feel that itch, that pleasurable itch, as he had done before those paintings. He pressed the button on his telephone.

"Charlie, come in, will you?"

Charles Marriott, immaculate as usual in a white shirt and a blue tie, with his blond hair pushed off his forehead with that tiny fling of casual composure, his blue eyes alert, attentive, devoted, though with perhaps a hint of mischief—otherwise Jack could not have stood him—sat and waited.

"I want everything on Furlough's. From anywhere. Use Sally; use Tim. Go down there and check the local libraries if necessary. I'm even prepared to authorize Friedland."

"Friedland . . ."

"It would be so easy he'd snort. He's usually breaking into banks and computer centers. Some half-assed bindery in Cornwall wouldn't be much of a challenge. Wouldn't even need to wait till the lights went out."

"But what . . ."

"I don't know, Charles. I don't know. But my itch tells me that, in the words of one of Nathan's presidents, we've been trying to find out who's been pissing into the tent."

"When instead . . ."

"We'd better check to make sure if anyone's been pissing out."

Brother Tom emailed Alice. He felt bad about it. He was doing as he was told, but he knew that was no excuse. It never was. Not that it ever stopped him. Was everyone like this? He didn't really need to ask because they told him every day, even with their mouths shut.

She drove him to a pub by the sea. She asked how he was getting on at Furlough's. He told her he was settling in fine, enjoyed his job. Said that the only thing he couldn't understand was this recent fire. All sorts of rumors about it, of course, so what did she think?

"I have no idea, Tom. Nobody does. I think they might be looking for meanings where there are none."

The statement intrigued him. He gestured to her to continue.

"What does it all mean? It means that some of the young men round here have nothing to do, and no money to do it with anyway. So if you have no part in the world you find around you, why not pull some of it down from time to time? Or even burn it down."

"Wanton violence?" he wrote down on the pad.

"There's plenty of it. It's just that this was bigger than usual. How long would it take me to learn sign language, do you think?"

Tom smiled and shrugged to show that he didn't know. He couldn't remember, he wrote on his pad. Why did she want to learn anyway?

"So that I can speak to you without you having to write things down." Why did women like him so much? If they knew some of the things he really did, they wouldn't.

"You seemed to know Sam Furlough well, Alice." He deliberately wrote her name, and he saw her pause over it. A tiny blush.

"Well enough. Crabby old bastard. Bit of a rogue, to be honest. Anyway, he took you on."

"Could you arrange for me to meet him again?"

She read this and stared at him for a moment. "Why?"

"I think I could do a much bigger job than the one I'm doing. And I know he's not happy with the person who's doing it."

"All right then. I mean, I can do that . . . Would you like to come back to my flat, Tom? I could make you a meal, if you liked."

Tom nodded.

As the two of them were leaving the pub in Cornwall, Jack was sitting in London with a pile of papers on his desk, and his computer screen flashing. Staying late in the office again. Page after page and screen after screen. Back and forth then back again. Looking for a pattern. It was always there, in the information, if you could only see it. It always astonished him afterward that anyone could have missed anything so obvious for so long. The connection between the American printers and the Cornish bindery was this: King James Bibles burnt and the letters INFOUT. Furlough's was owned outright by Sam Furlough, and the place in the States by someone called Anning. Nothing there. What? Where? There had to be something.

"Sorry darling," he said into the phone, which had just rung, "just forget me, all right? I'll creep in at some point. No, don't worry, I had a bite at the pub."

Jack was still turning his pages in London when Alice finally turned out the light in Cornwall.

"Never met anyone like you," she said, slipping out of her last piece of clothing. She didn't know that he could hear this, because she hadn't said it. Tom was wary of his attraction for women. Often he knew that what they found in him was everything they had never found elsewhere, and it's hard to make up for all the damage the world has done so far. And it had been a long time. He could hear her in the dark, not that she was speaking. Not with her mouth anyway. "What is it like to live in so much silence? Put your hand lower down. No, here. I'm going to make you happy tonight."

It's not as silent in here as you think, Brother Tom thought, as she kissed him. He kissed back. Sometimes it's even louder than it is out there. But maybe not tonight.

"Sam, I've been wanting to come over so you could meet Tom again. Tom really likes working here. He's mastered that job on the gluing machine. Thinks he could operate the trimmers."

"They tell me that's skilled work."

"He's a skilled person. I mean, he learns skills quickly. And he's noticed how much wastage you seem to have on that section."

"That's easy enough to explain, given the present . . . Tell you what, I'll give him a try. He can come in this Saturday. Just a few of my special workers, him and me. Have a job on. Usual operator won't be there. So how's that?"

Tom smiled as he looked at the boss. A big man, well over six feet, his hair half-grey, half-brown. Tufts of it stuck up into the air. One little tuft stuck out of his left nostril. He had a big rugged face, and Tom couldn't quite tune in. Not yet, anyway. But he would.

That Saturday they started at nine. The work was complicated, and it took a lot of concentration on Tom's part to suss out all he was meant to do. This minimized his periods of concentrated reading, but every so often they stopped for a coffee, and he focused entirely on Sam Furlough. He was trying to tune him through INFOUT. You can access wave-form cerebretonics in the same way you find a radio station or hunt through a library index, as long as you know what you are looking for. But it's not

easy, and it's not always very precise. There are tiny reverberations. INFOUT. He tuned again and again. And there was something there, he was sure, but it was imprecise. What was he picking up? Could it be just the memory of the paint outside? It must have registered, as he stared at the blackened remains of his warehouse.

Parsley honey. Parsimony. Paris money. Parsnip sonny ...

What? What? What? Was it anything at all? Some old song ...

When the work was finished he went walking by the sea. He had said he would meet Alice at the pub later, but he kept going over these sounds, these vague and half-defined morphologies of words. Something there, inside Furlough that linked up in his mind with INFOUT. More than a memory? The sea thrashed over the rocks and eased him a little. Trust those waves, he thought. Sink a little further in those waves. Trust the journey. Minutes went by, hours possibly, and then he jumped up and started running back to the small hotel.

Once the laptop was switched on he entered his passwords, in the necessary six sequences. He opted to go through to Jack and Nathan simultaneously: *The name of the place where the printing plant was in New Jersey. I need the name.*

Parsley sonny. Parsimony. Paris money ...

He sat staring at the screen. The answer came from Jack first.

The printing house that was burned down was in Parsipanny, New Jersey. Why?

Parsipanny. It had been mangled, but that was what he was receiving. He tapped back rapidly on the laptop keys.

Find this out: how did the word Parsipanny get into Sam Furlough's head? Because it's there all right. I can hear it.

When he finally left the hotel he saw Alice sitting in her car outside. It had been an hour before that they had arranged to meet at the pub. She looked disappointed, so he kissed her. She asked him if he would be wanting to come back to her flat again. He wrote that he would. She started the car but he made her stop it again. He went back into the hotel to fetch his laptop.

"Come on Charlie, it can't be that difficult, surely. What's the connection between Sam Furlough and Parsipanny, New Jersey? If we can work that out, we've solved our problem, haven't we? So get on to all these expensive computers we've bought you and bloody well find out."

He had decided to send Friedland in anyway. They'd hit the place last night. Papers were being sifted now. This had to be done quickly. These things could be missed quite soon. Didn't want any country plods asking awkward questions. Not that it was too difficult to shut them up if they did. But it was a bore. So before any papers were missed, Jack wanted his answer. Charles came back into the room.

"Do you know what they are binding down there next week?"

"Surprise me, Charlie."

"A Koran. Very lavish edition. For Dubai. Three hundred pounds each."

Jack thought for a moment. "Forget it."

"But what if ..."

"I said forget it, Charlie. Doesn't relate."

Charles left the room, but he was back two minutes later, with a pile of papers.

"Guess what these are?"

"Just give me the headlines, Mr. Marriott."

"Unpaid invoices to SOP."

"SOP?"

"Salvation Outpost, Pennsylvania, remember?"

"Going back how far?"

"Five months. A lot of money. Ninety percent of Furlough's money comes from SOP."

"And what's SOP's problem, exactly?"

"Recession seems to be hitting the scripture business along with everyone else. They just filed for bankruptcy."

"And where would that leave Furlough's?"

"Doing exactly the same thing very shortly, I should think. Unless Dubai want an awful lot of those gold-embossed Korans."

Jack was angry. Four nights with hardly any sleep, but the one thing he had not checked out was SOP. Not where the Bibles were coming from, then, but where they were going. Idiot.

"And listen to this. *The last shipment to you of one hundred thousand Bibles will not be delivered until some of these invoices are paid.*"

"What's the date of that?"

"February. Three months back."

"So where did they go, then, those Bibles? Get on to their freighting agents. I want a history of all movements out of Furlough's for the last four months."

Charles was good at this sort of thing. He enjoyed getting on the phone or even turning up unexpectedly in sundry offices, giving a slightly mysterious account of his provenance, but making it abundantly clear that he needed some answers, and quickly. They could phone Whitehall if they chose. They never did. By the end of that day, he had his information. It transpired that a very large shipment of Bibles, one hundred thousand in fact, had left Southampton ten weeks before. They had been on their way to SOP in Pennsylvania, but had been diverted as a result of special instructions from the shipper. On arrival in the States they were to be transported instead to Parsipanny, New Jersey, there to be held until further notice.

"And in the meantime he carries on making the Bibles that were ordered before."

"Even though he's not getting paid for the ones he's delivering."

"What else can he do, though? If that's 90 percent of the business. SOP will sort themselves out, he thinks. I mean, what else can he do?"

"Close the business down, I suppose."

"The one thing I suspect our friend Sam Furlough is not prepared to do, from everything I've been reading about him. Better send an email to Tom. Might be getting a touch confused down there. Would be understandable."

And so we have made the connection through to Parsipanny. Only thing we can't do at this moment is find out the connection between Sam Furlough and Hemmings, which is largely owned by May Anning. Keep plugging away—I know you call it something else, but just keep doing it. Jack.

Tom was given the new job. The other man was sacked. Furlough never did like him anyway, and the wastage started to decrease from the first day he was gone. Tom relaxed. He loved being by the sea. He enjoyed spending the evenings and nights with Alice. Each time he saw her she tried out a few more signs on him. She had bought a book. I LOVE YOU: she was very good at that one. All he had to do now was find them one more connection and they could send him back. First to London, then to the States. Far away from the sea, then. And from Alice. He stared out at the waves and he wondered.

"A surprise. I'd say close your eyes, but then you wouldn't be able to see my lips move. Sam has invited us over to his house for dinner. He's so pleased with your work, and with me introducing you, that he said he'd like to entertain us for the evening. What do you think?"

Tom had the feeling that the last cards were being dealt from a pack, and he was no longer sure what he thought. Couldn't really say no, could he?

Furlough's house was a mighty affair on top of a hill overlooking the bay. It was a

lot bigger than when he'd bought it. He'd added garages and a billiards room. Even a studio, for some reason. His children only came back occasionally, these days. And his wife?

He was lavish with his hospitality, and although Tom didn't drink, Alice did. She kept emptying her glass and Sam kept filling it up again. So symmetrically smooth was this maneuver that by nine o'clock she was drunk. She was so amiably drunk that Tom didn't mind, but she evidently could not drive, and driving was one thing he avoided himself. A taxi?

"That would be expensive. I'd drive you myself but I've had a few too, you know. Tell you what. Why don't you stay here? Plenty of rooms. Out of interest, will you need one room or two? You give me the impression of having got very close, you two."

At three A.M., with everyone else long sunk into sleep, Tom made his way through the rooms. In his silent world he could be silent. A practiced creeper. He had his flashlight, so he didn't need to switch on lights. For an hour he mused his way through drawers and files. Nothing much. Nothing to send back. Then he stood looking idly at the photographs on Furlough's desk. He'd pretty much given up. One picture was thirty years back or more. A bright young woman graduating from some distinguished American institution. And he had seen her face in another photograph in another room, hadn't he? The name, though: the name here was different. May Anning. He remembered Furlough speaking of his wife. "My wife May," he had said. The laptop was still in the car where he had put it when he thought they were going back to Alice's flat. He slipped out now and brought it back. He came in to the study and switched it on. He tapped away quickly.

May Anning. You said the owner of the Parsipanny company was May Anning. Maiden name of Furlough's wife. So now you have your connection. Go to work.

Tom could sense him before he saw him. His big frame in the doorway of the study. Tom turned to face him. Violence? No, it seemed to be all resignation now. That's what he felt coming out of him. He knew that, whatever it was, it was already too late. Furlough spoke to him, slowly and deliberately. His way of speaking presented no trouble to a lip-reader.

"I read a biography once, Tom, of one of your great writers: David Henry Thoreau. Now I seem to remember that Thoreau was locked up in the gaol in Concord. And the reason he was there was that he wouldn't pay his taxes. Why not? Well, because he said by paying them he'd be financing a war against Mexico that he did not believe in. And also financing the American clergy, whose pious prattle made him want to vomit. His dear friend Ralph Waldo Emerson finally turned up to see him. 'David,' he said, 'what are you doing in here?' To which Thoreau replied, so the book said, 'Ralph, what are you doing out there?'

"I'm out here, but I've got a funny feeling I'm the one behind the bars. Who are you really, Tom? When you're not gluing my Bibles together? I did wonder if you really wanted to sniff the stuff. Be a good job for a glue-sniffer, wouldn't it? But who are you, my friend?"

A day later Tom sat in the room in Swiss Cottage. Jack and Charles Marriott were in armchairs. Cyril was at the table, finishing his exposition.

"So, to summarize. Our friend was running a pretty successful business down in Cornwall, picking up some nice subsidies en route. But he couldn't keep it going without his major client, SOP, *aka* Salvation Outpost, Pennsylvania. They unfortunately have got both feet on banana skins for all sorts of reasons. Not the only ones in the present climate, of course. It was only a matter of time before they went belly-up. Furlough continues to bind the Bibles, as requested. He's cut it down to the bone anyway

because he's competing with American printers and binders, but SOP, like others in the States, do like this bit about the King James Bible printed by the Queen's own dear printers back in England, where it all got started. So he gives them the cheapest prices going. But they can no longer pay even those. And Furlough can't offload the stuff anywhere else. He's got a hundred thousand of them halfway across the Atlantic when he hears that SOP are pretty much done for. What is he supposed to do?

"What he does is phone his ex-wife, née May Anning, who runs her own printing outfit in Parsipanny, New Jersey. Could she please receive these Bibles that he can no longer deliver to Pennsylvania? Turns out she's delighted. Business hasn't been too great at her end either. Very amicable divorce, it was. One of those scenes where the pair of them realized they couldn't share a space or a life anymore, but were devoted to their children, etc., etc. Set up their first printing endeavor together many years before. Now they had one here, one there. His and hers. Grown-up children divided their holidays between them. Came as a bit of a shock apparently, when she realized she couldn't even charge him for the warehousing, because he didn't have anything left with which to pay her.

"So, now we have an interesting situation. There's a hundred thousand Bibles in Parsipanny and a hundred and fifty thousand new ones being bound in Cornwall, and no one left to pay for a single copy. Furlough says what happened next was his clever wife's idea . . ."

"Nathan says they've just been interviewing Anning over there, and she insists it was his . . ."

"No surprise there, then. Nice to know some things in marriage remain constant. Anyway, it was just after that business with the burning of the Koran. You'll remember. So they dreamed up a merry wheeze, and a really very astute one, so it seems to me. Torch the place, add a little hint that Islamic extremists were involved. INFOUT: that got us boys going, didn't it? Then claim the money from the insurance. Very nearly worked, too. Operating on the perfectly symmetrical principle that when we have to put restrictions on information . . ."

" . . . the information anyone can get is thereby restricted. The insurance company in the States had already been told by some of our friends to back off and pay up, what with matters of national security at stake. Until we'd worked out who this new group was. The same would presumably have been the case here. If it hadn't been for . . . In fact, do you know, I can't now remember how it was we clicked."

At this point Brother Tom took out his pad and wrote the following words on it: *Parsley honey. Parsimony. Paris money.* Cyril read it.

"Ah yes, quite. Now I remember. We're all indebted to you, Tom. Greatly indebted, I must say."

Six hours later, Brother Tom was twenty-nine thousand feet over the Atlantic. Already the sound of the sea was dying inside him. He had promised Alice that he would email her as soon as he was back in the States. Would he, though? Would he? Alone in his bed once more tonight. And no waves except for the ones he was paid to decipher. ○

SCIENCE FICTION HAIKU

in the shadows of deep space
we provision
our Night Ship to Never

—Kendall Evans and David C. Kopaska-Merkel

NEXT ISSUE

OCTOBER/ NOVEMBER ISSUE

Once again, we've somehow managed to cram an unbelievable amount of fiction into our annual October/November double issue. Not one, but two outstanding novellas jostle for room between the magazine's covers (or vie for pixles as the case may be). Multiple award winner **Kij Johnson** treats us to a remarkable feat of engineering on a hostile alien planet and introduces us to "The Man Who Bridged the Mist." The story's evocative images are sure to linger on long after you reach Empire's Farside for the very last time. By then, though, you'll be careening through **Kristine Kathryn Rusch's** dramatic tale of danger and destruction where "Stealth" can have the deadliest of consequences.

ALSO IN OCTOBER/ NOVEMBER

Between these massive novellas we've somehow managed to squeeze in a host of novelettes and short stories. Since this is our annual slightly scary issue, you'll actually find ghosts and trolls in **Eleanor Arnason's** enchanting "My Husband Steinn"; **Kit Reed** brings us a little bit of terror in the sardonic "Outside Event"; **Derek Künsken** investigates some bizarre and murderous social systems in "To Live and Die in Gibbontown"; new writer **Dominica Phetteplace** reveals the secrets of "The Cult of Whale Worship"; new writer **Jason K. Chapman** shows us just how relentlessly tomorrow and tomorrow creeps in "This Petty Pace"; **Jack Skillingstead** offers up a wry tale that takes today's quest to liberate information to its logical conclusions in "Free Dog"; the Hugo- and Nebula-Award winning author **Nancy Kress** predicts the coming water wars in "A Hundred Hundred Daisies"; and **Eugene Mirabelli** charms us with the story of "The Pastry Chef, the Nanotechnologist, the Aerobics Instructor, and the Plumber."

OUR EXCITING FEATURES

Robert Silverberg's "Reflections" column thumbs through a "Writer's Diary"; **Norman Spinrad's** "On Books" column contemplates the "Inside / Outside" of the SF genre; **James Patrick Kelly's** On the Net gets pretty "Steamed"; plus we'll have an array of poetry and other features you're sure to enjoy. Look for our October/November issue on sale at newsstands on August 30, 2011. Or you can subscribe to *Asimov's* —in paper format or in downloadable varieties—by visiting us online at www.asimovs.com. We're also available individually or by subscription on *Amazon.com*'s Kindle, *BarnesandNoble.com*'s Nook, and *ebookstore.sony.com*'s eReader!

Introduction

It's time for us to appreciate and applaud again the editors and publishers who are working to keep the genre's heritage alive in glorious fresh editions for new generations of readers.

Fritz the Cool Cat

Given Fritz Leiber's love of felines, and the fact that he was responsible for one of the great Beatnik SF stories of all time, "The Beat Cluster" (see the astonishingly groovy *Galaxy* magazine cover illo for "Beat Cluster" here: www.philsp.com/data/images/g/galaxy_196110.jpg), it was hard for me to resist the headline above. And even though co-editors Jonathan Strahan and the late, lamented Charles Brown do not include "The Beat Cluster" in their volume *Fritz Leiber: Selected Stories* (Night Shade Books, hardcover, \$24.95, 360 pages, ISBN 978-1-59780-180-5), we can still easily assess Mr. Leiber as a very hep fellow. Born into a show-biz tradition, he always seemed at ease with both high and low culture, a bohemian soul very sensitive to the zeitgeist and to humanity's primal urges—modernity and ancientness united. The fabulous stories in this volume certainly bear that image out.

The editors have chosen to arrange the stories in strict chronological order (with one exception), and that strategy works perfectly. We open with "Smoke Ghost" from 1941, and are instantly bowled over. This story exhibits all of Leiber's sophistication, verbal dexterity, skewed vision, and unflinchingly dark attitude. (Somehow I often think of Leiber as Sturgeon's dark twin.) While he might have enhanced his sheer writing chops over the subsequent decades, Leiber's *weltanschauung* was already fully formed by this early point. This tale of a man who

begins to apprehend a very modern type of horrific specter is so seminal that nearly all of contemporary urban fantasy and horror can be traced back to it, Ellison's "Paingod" and many others being among Leiber's children. Swiftly following, "The Girl with the Hungry Eyes," "Coming Attraction," and "A Deskful of Girls" live up to this standard, displaying a kind of *conte cruel* atmosphere. The last named tale is particularly nasty all around, with nary a "hero" in sight.

But of course, Leiber could masterfully vary his tone and approach. "A Pail of Air" intervenes in the roll call above, and that famous story of indomitable survival amidst cosmic disaster is indeed inspiring and positive and optimistic—if of course you first discount the death of 99 percent of the human race that launches the scenario!

Even a whimsical, mostly joyous romp such as "Space-Time for Springer," told from the POV of an exuberant kitten, involves madness and disfiguration and a tragic end for a bright spirit. Madness, overall, was one of Leiber's dominant concerns and motifs. It features again in "The Inner Circles," a surreal story cited by Neil Gaiman in his introduction as particularly potent on Gaiman's own young imagination. At times, Leiber offers a Lovecraftian take on sanity (recall that the very young Fritz was part of HPL's correspondence circle). From "Catch That Zepplin!": ". . . those absolute boundaries in Space and Time which are our sole protection against Chaos . . ." One can sense that Leiber's existential angst powered his writing deeply, and must have also contributed to his problems with alcohol.

Of course, Leiber also wrote his famous pure-fun sequence about those sword-and-sorcerous rogues, Fafhrd and

the Grey Mouser. You'll find three such items on this table of contents. But as light-hearted as these adventures might be, they are also filled with treachery and murder and ethical compromises.

I think we can safely say that there is no one today in the SF genre manifesting Leiber's precise suite of skills and outlooks. You'd have to fuse Thomas Ligotti, Charles de Lint, and Laird Barron for starters. His contribution to the field was immense, and you should start to sample it right here.

The Case of the Dreamer: Closed

Sixteen years, and one man's shattered life: those items are two measures of what the publication of *The Complete Stories of Theodore Sturgeon* encompassed. (Volume One, *The Ultimate Egotist*, appeared in 1994.) For now, at last, you note, we reach the end (which of course is really just the beginning of the legacy of these volumes).

Here is *Case and the Dreamer* (North Atlantic Books, hardcover, \$35.00, 400 pages, ISBN 978-1-55643-934-6), the thirteenth and concluding volume in the series, and the second one not assembled with the full guidance of editor Paul Williams. Suffering from premature Alzheimer's brought on by a brain injury, Paul ceded his duties one book ago to Noël Sturgeon, daughter of the writer. And a capable and loving job she does, providing the usual informative story notes herself, and showcasing introductory material by other contributors. (There's a handy story-title index for all thirteen books also.) And even Paul Williams is present, in the form of a long essay on Sturgeon's career and personal life, written in 1976 but first published in 1997.

So the final installment of this marvelous and unique package comes stuffed with all the great apparatus of the earlier volumes. But what of the fiction? Weren't these stories (1973-1983, with one exception) pulled from Sturgeon's "dotation"? Can they really be any good?

Once you begin reading, you will not

be able to doubt the late-career miracles Sturgeon was capable of. For just one instance, consider "The Country of Afterward." Only Sturgeon could conceive of a utopia founded by sex "terrorists," and then sell the story to *Hustler* magazine of all places, perhaps the essentially antithetical home base of his notions. Then there's the title piece, as pure a distillation of Sturgeon-grade romance, melancholy, problem-solving, and depth psychology as anything in his canon. Or take "Time Warp." Reading this jazzy, myth-besotted space opera, you might at first say, "Wow, Sturgeon was learning new stuff from James Tiptree and Ian Wallace and Cordwainer Smith, and breaking fresh ground in his work." Then, on second thought, you'll recall all the similar lyrical, mythic, multiplex work from Sturgeon himself in the 1940s and 1950s, and you'll say, "No, he was really just illustrating with a mix of modesty and pride the fact that he pioneered all these techniques first!" The other major piece here—and even the minor ones sing—is "Why Dolphins Don't Bite," which posits the limits even genuine enlightenment must run up against.

And what of Sturgeon's ultimate story, "Grizzly," written in the throes of the lung disease that was killing him? Morbid black humor jazzily delivered. It makes me tear up a little to find out that the very last published line from his pen was "And we both shouted and danced."

In the review above, I called Fritz Leiber Sturgeon's shadow twin. I think this illustrates why. One can't imagine Leiber in his gloom ever capering, while Sturgeon does so despite all tribulations.

I have reviewed every one of these books as they appeared, in one venue or another, marking my own sixteen-year odyssey with the writings of a man I have in fact been reading since childhood. It's a melancholy feeling to realize this particular voyage of discovery and rediscovery is at an end for me. But I can only be thrilled that this shelf of essential fiction is now shiningly assembled for others to encounter and enjoy.

Haffner Press Rules!

Loyal readers of this feature might recall that a few issues ago I did a whole column on NESFA Press, with a title similar to the one above. Why the repeat riff? Well, I never said "NESFA Press Rules Alone!" did I? In the exact same sense of dedication and good taste creating a beautiful line of unique books, Haffner Press—run by Stephen Haffner—achieves much the same result as the wizards of NESFA—and almost singlehandedly.

Today we look at recent work from three Haffner authors: Jack Williamson, C.L. Moore, and Henry Kuttner.

Recent, of course, in the sense of newly compiled, not newly written!

I believe the last-reviewed book here in the Williamson cycle of *Complete Stories* was Volume 5. So today we will look at Volumes 6 and 7, with a reminder that the whole project wraps up with Volume 8.

Gateway to Paradise (hardcover, \$40.00, 592 pages, ISBN 978-1-893887-27-5) is filled to the brim with just Williamson's partial output for 1940 and 1941. Here we see him employing his mature skills to meet a number of different markets, and to satisfy his own craving for artistic and intellectual variety (including, in Volume 7, even a mainstream story based on his meteorological service in WWII). The book contains several items that were later printed in expanded or extant form as complete novels, so you are truly getting your money's worth, as always, with this huge tome. The first entry in the table of contents is one such larger tale, "Reign of Wizardry," which finds Williamson doing a very credible Robert E. Howard. "Darker Than You Think," his famous sex-and-werewolves tale, is here too. (Shouldn't Williamson's estate be getting some *Twilight* money?) And the title piece saw another life as half an Ace Double, *Dome Around America*.

"Racketeers in the Sky" has some surprisingly postmodern things to say about media charlatans. Its protagonist, Dr. Bull, might summon up images of Glenn Beck, for instance. And "The Crystal of Death" is positively Lovecraftian.

But I'd like to focus on two other pieces to try to elucidate what makes Williamson's work—and that of some of his Golden Age peers—so exciting and unlike anything being written today.

Consider "The Sun Maker." The scenario is very similar to Leiber's "A Pail of Air." The Earth has been detached from orbit around the Sun, and is a frozen lifeless ball with pockets of desperate, dwindling survivors. Williamson milks this horrific and melancholy milieu for all it's worth. But then he re-complicates the tale with the addition of a subterranean race of reptile men! And, shades of Gene Wolfe, the culmination of the action is the birth of a new life-giving sun. What modern writer would dare to cobble together so many "superfluous" or "discordant" riffs? And yet the giddy head-spinning excitement from daring to do so is unsurpassed.

Likewise, "The Girl in the Bottle." Start with an unlikely yet heroic seventy-nine-year-old American spy in the middle of a Nazi mad scientist's compound, add in a populated, shrunken, navigable planet the size of "a golf ball," toss in a beautiful princess and immortality—holy cats, what a ride!

It seems to me that Williamson deliberately followed the slogan he put on the lips of Dr. Bull: "Imagination. Audacity. Victory!" More writers nowadays should strive to do so, lest SF become too proper, prim, polished, and perfected.

By contrast with the previous volume, *With Folded Hands . . . and Searching Mind* (hardcover, \$40.00, 592 pages, ISBN 978-1-893887-37-4) took seventeen years of work to fill, containing stories from 1941 through 1958. Life and a changing marketplace and shifting career focus intervened to ensure that Williamson's days of vast story production would cease. But those factors did not dim his ambition or reach. And in fact his prose and pacing and ambitions seem more "mature" here somehow, albeit still full of youthful vigor and zest.

This volume opens with a dystopia, "Backlash," in which a planet-wide dicta-

torship is undone by time-travel intervention—but only after near-disaster. This theme is emblematic of Williamson's core concerns with the future potential social arrangements of humanity—maybe a bigger focus for him than any techno gimmicks. Had Williamson lived until today's zenith of social networking, I'm sure he would have participated intelligently, with lots of keen observations. A second story, "The Equalizer," likewise concerns itself with how society might ideally function—this time with an emphasis on anarcho-libertarianism, à la Eric Frank Russell's work of this same period.

This focus is further borne out by the centerpiece of the volume: "With Folded Hands . . ." and "...And Searching Mind," the two pieces that became Williamson's most famous book, *The Humanoids*. (And shouldn't this tale of galaxy-conquering robots draw royalties from the *Battlestar Galactica* franchise?) Culminating with an almost mystical vision of humanity's powers to transcend a mechanistic universe, the book seems in some ways a forerunner of Philip K. Dick's exploration of what constitutes "real" humans. The standalone story "Hocus-Pocus Universe" offers additional slants on this theme.

Volume 7 is rounded out with many other entertainments, including one story, "Guinevere for Everybody," whose opening line is literally unforgettable (I've held it in mind for decades now): "The girl stood chained in the vending machine." And we get an Appendix of non-fiction, as well as the traditional gorgeous endpapers composed of magazine cover art.

The final installment of this monument to one man's talent and another man's visionary preservation instincts will, I am sure, be a fitting, revelatory capstone.

Haffner's newest monumental project involves bringing back into print a good chunk of the work of Henry Kuttner and C.L. Moore, husband and wife past masters. Today, we will peruse one volume of

their work as collaborators (after their 1940 marriage, it is generally documented that all stories issuing from their fiction factory were more or less jointly constructed), and one volume of Kuttner's earliest solo work. Let's look at Kuttner sans Moore first, because it will lay the groundwork for seeing what she added to the literary team.

Terror in the House (hardcover, \$40.00, 712 pages, ISBN 978-1893887466) opens with Kuttner's oft-reprinted debut, "The Graveyard Rats," a little chiller about a bad guy undone in a nasty fashion by his greed. Subscribing momentarily to the somewhat dicey but intriguing theory that an author's entire career can be projected outward from his or her first sale, we might put Kuttner down for a professional lifetime of creepy, visceral thrills told in compulsively readable and streamlined prose, with little subtext or depth. And that, more or less, is indeed what we find in *Terror in the House*, which covers the first three years of Henry K.'s output.

The stories appearing in *Weird Tales* are the more sophisticated ones, possessing genuine supernatural content often borrowed from the Cthulhu Mythos. Their prose is denser and more colorful as well. An entry like "The Eater of Souls" or "The Jest of Droom-Avista" is almost a prose poem of the Dunsany or Clark Ashton Smith variety—for indeed, Smith was a major influence on the young Kuttner. But the bulk of the other tales, first manifesting in *Thrilling Mystery* and *Spicy Mystery*, are bizarre and semi-sadistic "Scooby Doo" exploits, in which overt unreality is always explained away by the climax, and people—mostly women—are imperiled and tortured by a variety of malignant perps. If Jack Williamson's stories of this same period represent a cornfed, bucolic, American idealism, Kuttner's hark to a dope-stoked, urban, Euro decadence. I think it unwise to infer any personal kinks in Kuttner's psyche from these EC-comics-style tales, which were written to a narrow niche market and were as formulaic as any grand guignol.

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So when we arrive at *Detour to Otherness* (hardcover, \$40.00, 588 pages, ISBN 978-1893887183), we are shocked at the transformation undergone by Kuttner after his association with Catherine Moore. Sure, as Robert Silverberg opines in his excellent introduction, some of the change might be attributed to personal maturation. But it feels to me more like an awakening derived from consorting with another stimulating mind of equal caliber.

The ingenuity level in these stories manifests a quantum leap. They start out sly and subtle—or, in the case of the silly Hogben and Gallegher series, weird and outrageous—and develop with ineluctable yet unpredictable logic. There is not an extra word or bit of plot padding. They are full of humor, pathos, and philosophy.

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Primal themes—often involving familial relations (between spouses, between parents and children)—abound, as do larger speculations, often concerning the future of our species.

The Kuttners pioneered the paranoid mind games of Phil Dick in "Android." They crafted an urban fantasy as if written by Alfred Bester in "Rite of Passage." They invented "future shock" in "The Little Things." They even beat Monty Python and David Foster Wallace to the punch with "Nothing But Gingerbread Left," their version of the Killer Joke/Video riff. In short, this real-life instantiation of Sturgeon's gestalt intelligence left us a legacy still exerting its influence today, on all those lucky enough to encounter these tales. O

SF CONVENTIONAL CALENDAR

Besides the World SF Convention in Reno, good August bets are ArmadilloCon, BuboniCon, and PiCon. DragonCon's a multi-media blowout, with thousands in attendance; but there's an SF con hidden inside if you look. Plan now for social weekends with your favorite SF authors, editors, artists, and fellow fans. For an explanation of con(vention)s, a sample of SF folksongs, and info on fanzines and clubs, send me an SASE (self-addressed, stamped #10 [business] envelope) at 10 Hill #22-L, Newark NJ 07102. The hot line is (973) 242-5999. If a machine answers (with a list of the week's cons), leave a message and I'll call back on my nickel. When writing cons, send an SASE. For free listings, tell me of your con five months out. Look for me at cons behind the Filthy Pierre badge, playing a musical keyboard. —Erwin S. Strauss

JULY 2011

29-31—**PulpFest**. For info, write: c/o Cullers, 1272 Cheatham Way, Bellbrook OH 45305. Or phone: (973) 242-5999 (10 am to 10 pm, not collect). (Web) pulpfest.com. (E-mail) jack@pulpfest.com. Con will be held in: Columbus OH (if city omitted, same as in address) at the Ramada Hotel and Conference Center. Guests will include: none announced. "Celebrating 80 Years of the Shadow."

AUGUST 2011

4-7—**GenCon**. (206) 957-3976. gencon.com. Indiana Convention Center, Indianapolis IN. One of the big gaming cons of the year.

5-7—**MuseCon**. musecon.org. Westin, Itasca (near Chicago) IL. S. J. (Soo) Tucker. "Music, blinkies, and all forms of creativity."

5-7—**Fandomonium**. fandomonium.org. Nampa ID. Brothers Thir13en, Lynn Hardy, Jason Wills, Custodians of Otakudom. Multi-genre.

12-14—**AniMiniConSoHo**, SoHo Gallery for Digital Art, 138 Sullivan, New York NY 10012. (212) 228-2810. animiniconsoho.com.

17-21—**RenoVation**, Box 13278, Portland OR 97213. renovationsf.org. Reno NV. Asher, C. Brown (I. M.), Powers. WorldCon. \$195+.

19-21—**MonsterMania**. monstermania.net. Crowne Plaza, Cherry Hill NJ (near Philadelphia PA). Horror media.

26-28—**ArmadilloCon**, Box 27277, Austin TX 78755. fact.org. Renaissance Hotel. Bacigalupi, Lou Anders (of Pyr), M. Finn, Duarte.

26-28—**PICon**, Box 400, Sunderland MA 01375. pi-con.org. Holiday Inn, Enfield CT (Springfield/Hartford). Jo Walton, Dr. P. Gay.

26-28—**BuboniCon**, Box 37257, Albuquerque NM 87176. bubonicon.com. Airport Sheraton. Stephen Leigh, S. L. Farrell, J. Picacio.

26-28—**ConText**, Box 163391, Columbus OH 43216. contextsf.org. Doubletree, Worthington OH. SF & related games, comics & films.

26-29—**Abunai**. abunaicon.nl. NH Koningsho, Veldhoven, Netherlands. Anime.

SEPTEMBER 2011

2-5—**DragonCon**, Box 16459, Atlanta GA 30321. dragoncon.org. "Classic comic books, low-brow pop art, designer toys."

9-11—**Conjecture**, Box 927388, San Diego CA 92192. 2011.conjecture.org. Hilton, Mission Valley CA. Allen Steele. Literary focus.

16-18—**ConStellation**, Box 4857, Huntsville AL 35815. con-stellation.org. Holiday Inn Express. General SF/fantasy convention.

16-18—**Foolscap**, Box 2461, Seattle WA 98111. foolscapcon.org. Marriott, Redmond WA. Chiang, Woodring. SF/fantasy books/art.

16-18—**Great New England Steampunk Exhibition**, Box 362, Hampstead NH 03841. thegreat...exhibition.com. Fitchburg MA.

16-18—**MonsterMania**. monstermania.net. Crowne Plaza, Timonium (Baltimore) MD. S. Cunningham, A. Lehman, more. Horror media.

16-18—**Intervention**. interventioncon.com. Hilton, Rockville MD (near DC). Webcomics, and other people who live on the internet.

24—**Roc-Con**. rochesterscifianimecon.com. Main Street Armory, Rochester NY. J. G. Hertzler, Gresh, Skeates. Media SF and anime.

30-Oct. 2—**VCon**, Box 78069, Vancouver BC V5N 5W1. vcon.ca. Sheraton Airport. G. Benford, Jean-Pierre Normand, L. Lassek.

OCTOBER 2011

1—**MonsterFest**. monstertestva.com. Central Library, Chesapeake VA. "A Celebration of Classic Horror in Films and Literature."

6-9—**Sirens**, Box 149, Sedalia CA 80135. sirensconference.org. Cascade Resort, Vail CO. Larbalestier. Women in fantasy literature.

7-9—**Akicon**. akicon.org. info@akicon.org. Hilton, Bellevue WA. Kyle Herbert, Velocity Demos, NDP Comics. Anime.

14-16—**CapClave**, c/o Box 53, Ashton MD 20861. capclave.org. Hilton, Gaithersburg MD. Vaughn, Valente. Written SF/fantasy.

21-23—**AlbaCon**, Box 2065, Albany NY 12220. albacon.org. Best Western Sovereign. J. Kessler, S. Hickman, K. Decandido, Wormbat.

21-23—**Browncoat Ball**. browncoatball.com. Providence RI. "A Mighty Fine Shindig." For fans of Firefly and Serenity.

27-30—**World Fantasy Con**. wfc2011.org. Town & Country Resort, San Diego CA. Gaiman, Godwin. "Sailing the Sea of Imagination."

AUGUST 2012

30-Sep. 3—**Chicon 7**, Box 13, Skokie IL 60076. chicon.org. Chicago IL. Resnick, Morrill, Musgrave, Scalzi. WorldCon. \$155+.

AUGUST 2013

29-Sep. 2—**Texas in 2013**, Box 27277, Austin TX 78755. texas2013.org. San Antonio TX. Bid for WorldCon. Dates estimated.

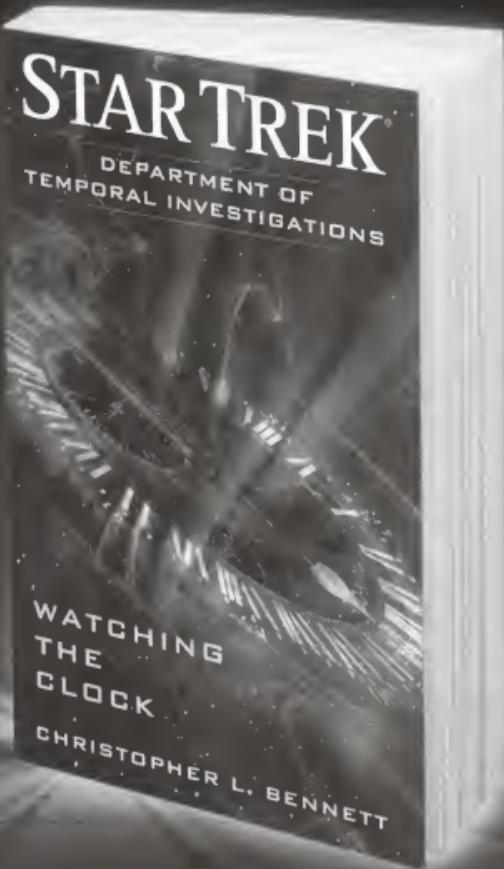
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